Stars, Stripes, and Aristocratic Snobs
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Stars, Stripes, and Aristocratic Snobs

by hayloftown

Summary

1/3 for the Atlas Series

Even hundreds of years since their historical wars over independence, American politics and British royalty still struggle to get along, as seen in the rivalry between first son Caleb Chapman and Prince Harrison of Wales. Even before Caleb's father, President Chapman, assumed office, the boys held a mutual disdain for one another. After a week long trip to the UK after the "tragic" passing of Prince Charles, the successor to the throne and Prince Harrison's father, the two are forced to get along and put forth a better front for the ever-present media.

Inspired by Red, White, and Royal Blue by Casey McQuiston's concept, but vastly different storylines.

** Please look at the tags before reading.**

Chapter 1: The Devil Incarnate

The first time Harrison ever heard the word “cancer”, he was eight years old.

It didn’t mean much at the time. He knew the word made the world go still, and he recalls the day that his family made that word public, posting it on a sign outside the gates of Buckingham Palace, the way tourists would weep over the gates, and hold one another tight. Every time he was caught out in public, especially with his siblings, the world would scream that they were praying for him and his heart. Harrison never really understood why.

Dad’s lack of presence due to treatments and surgeries was no different from their daily life. His cold demeanor spurred by steroids mirrored his attitude when he was healthy. He was not a kind man, no matter how many people say the opposite. The public pretends he was something noble and cherished. Harrison didn’t notice much of a difference when he was gone.

Harrison’s faith was tested, and eventually, destroyed. Not because of cancer, but because of the British people, the monarchy, and his own flesh and blood.

He was twenty four when Dad died.

Similar to when Dad got the cancer diagnosis, it didn’t mean much. Harrison had mourned his death for months before it happened, and had mourned the absence of parents since long before. He hasn’t had a father around for more than a day out of each year, and oftentimes, it was just for performative photo shoots. Those, usually, weren’t actually on any particular holiday. There was no bond between Dad and his only son, the only male offspring to the Kensington name remaining. Harrison would be surprised if his father even knew his name.

He wouldn’t say Dad didn’t love them. But Harrison would say, he never felt loved. Not by Dad, at least. And, to be fair, he knew his father’s history. He was in his early seventies, just trying to survive long enough to see himself become King as a "fuck you" to his brother, Harrison’s uncle Arthur. Dad had been a controversial face among politics, and when the backlash started, he receded all political stances and went silent on world topics. He was power hungry, and took advantage of his wealth in the worst ways possible, and never

looked at the children he created. He married twice, not having a single child with the first wife before she died in tragedy, only to have three with the second wife, a woman twenty years his younger. Two daughters and a son later, he successfully produced a lineage for the crown, one big enough to ensure his brother, with whom he had a rivalry that spanned decades, would never see the throne. Jokes on him-- Dad wouldn't, either.

Of course his death was sad. A parent is a parent, no matter how much they suck. But it wasn't the death that Harrison was mourning. It was the loss of a childhood, and how desperate he was for the fatherly love that all other children get-- even his cousins, also born into royalty. It was the cold eyes and smile-less face that appeared in every photo that featured Dad and his children. It was the way Mum looked elated to have the family she did, whilst Dad looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. He only had kids for the monarchy, for the line of succession, not for the family.

Harrison sits in his father's study, reviewing his shorthand notes on his desk. Some are about royal duties, like charity events and galas, but there's one that stuck out from an old notepad from what looked like the nineties. In the bottom corner, in the margins of the notebook, a doodle of a lighthouse. Does it even count as a doodle when it's that detailed? Clearly, Dad was either bored out of his mind or a secret artist, judging by the beautiful shading and contrast in the drawing. At the top right corner of the page, the date.

November the second, 1994. The day after Harrison was born.

He puffs out a breath, closing his eyes and tipping his head back. If it were sunny out, the light would cast across his face in a warm stroke, but instead, London is rainy as ever.

He doesn't want to think about his mother, alone in the hospital room with him as a newborn. Her second child. But the proof is there. He wonders what went on in Dad's head that day. Was he thinking about his newborn son? Or was he thinking about lighthouses? Harrison wants to believe that the lighthouse was some kind of metaphor for what their lives were, a metaphor for Harrison specifically. But he recalls how Dad was when Kate was born. He wasn't unhappy , but little changed.

He remembers Dad being good with Kate; always able to make her stop crying. He remembers one particular photo shoot, where he sat with all three children in the same chair. He smiled at Kate once,

bouncing the baby on his knee, earning an infantile giggle, which proceeded to make Harrison and Josephine smile, too. It was a beautiful photo, and one of the only ones of Dad smiling. In those moments, during the candid photos, Dad had looked at Josephine to see if she was smiling. Harrison now recognizes this as him making a chore out of the photos, but the moment still glows warm in his heart. Dad looked to Harrison next. Harrison thinks it was the first time his father properly looked at him, and he remembers feeling seen. But he also remembers the way Dad thrusted all three children toward their nannies thirty minutes after. Dad was far from a good person, but those thirty minutes of Dad holding them, laughing with them, playing, he almost felt normal, if only there were no cameras. He felt seen for the first time, sure. But he also felt unloved.

This week has been Hell. Not just because he hates his father, and despises the traditions of the throne, but because not a single moment of it has been about him. Which sounds awful, yes. But it's true.

The world mourns for the loss of a Prince, the death of the throne's successor. Gran mourns the loss of her son, because even she loved her children more than Dad loved his. Mum mourns her husband, and his sisters mourn their father. But none of them matter . The media is sadistic, making angst porn out of their tragedies, ripping apart the secrecy and private details of their lives. Already, Harrison has seen articles dissecting his childhood, using photos from the late nineties of a miserable toddler who wanted nothing to do with his father at a charity event, or the single photo of Harrison smoking a cigarette in his late teens as an act of rebellion. A story about how Harrison must hate his father. These stories are often overshadowed with the photos of Harrison and his sisters in a church, praying at the pews mere hours before Dad died, or a photo of Harrison holding a sobbing Kate in the infirmary halls shortly after Dad had died.

Maybe it is about him, but not in the ways it should be. The media claws at details, and every country in the world is milking his father's death for political vantage. Germany has done one hell of a tribute, and the Danish monarchy have, out of allegiance, done a white out event to raise money for cancer research, shutting down the majority of their businesses. Most monarchies and politicians would be in attendance to the week-long events for funerals and memorials, and Harrison dreaded seeing every single one of them.

"Thought I might find you here," Josephine hums from the doorway, softly shutting it behind her. "The Chapmans are here."

“And?” Harrison mutters in response, eyes shut and trying his hardest to catch his breath, trying his hardest to not picture the damned lighthouse, trying not to think of his father as a realist artist, and rather the villain that he was forced to endure and overcome.

“And we have to meet them for press,” she responds simply. She doesn’t budge, standing with her arms crossed and a straight face. She reminds him a lot of Mum when she stands like this. Both soft and stern. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” he sighs, rubbing his eyes. No. “Just… haven’t slept a whole lot.” Our father is dead and I never got a chance to know him . Or, perhaps, he did know him, and that surface level, heartless bastard was Dad.

“Me neither,” she approaches the desk, scanning the things Harrison dug out. She also caught sight of the date on the top page of the notebook. She frowns, carefully pushing it away and sitting on the thick, expensive mahogany. Harrison wonders where Josephine was when Harrison was born, while Mum was in the hospital having a baby, and Dad was in the midst of a meeting with the Prime Minister. “What are you thinking about?”

“Stupid stuff,” Harrison shrugs. “You?”

“Stupid people,” she cracks a slight smile. Harrison does too. “Mum wanted me to remind you to not be an idiot.”

“Because of the Americans?” Harrison asks, rolling his eyes. She nods. “I’m not an idiot. Maybe if he wasn’t such a prick by just existing-”

“I know,” Josephine laughs, shaking her head. “Trust me, I get it. I’m stuck with both his older sister and older brother. Andy-Junior is worse than their Dad.”

“I know,” Harrison groans. “Why don’t I get stuck with Brittany? Kate can have the younger ones. Why do I get stuck with the devil incarnate?”

“I don’t know. Probably something about boys with boys, or not wanting him to hit on Kate? I heard he was one of those… American jocks.” Josephine sympathizes. “Maybe we’ll be so pissed about the Americans that we won’t have to think about any of the other stuff though.”

“You are disgustingly optimistic.” Harrison pushes himself up out of

the chair, carefully putting away Dad's binders and notebooks. "Let's get this over with."

"That's the spirit."

Unfortunately, that's been his attitude for all of the past few months. They received Dad's end-stage diagnosis on the first of the year, and Harrison has spent the past five months just pleading with the Universe for it to be over. Put Dad out of his misery, so Harrison can finally be out of his. Since January, they've sat around waiting for Dad to just die. They thought he would die in February, then mid mid-March, then April 1st, and somehow, he just kept living. He died two days ago, finally, and somehow it's not over yet. Harrison is beginning to fear his father's life (and death) will haunt him forever.

The hilarity behind Dad's death is the fact that rainy ol' London's skies opened up the day he passed. It was a rather stunning spring day. May 18th, with the sun beaming, not a cloud in the sky. It was a mild 18 degrees Celsius. Harrison was sat at the window, the sun on his face, when Dad passed. He remembers feeling warmer when the machines were all switched off, when the room was emptied, as Mum and Gran followed him to the morgue. There was no pain in his passing, in Harrison's opinion.

The world healed when he died, and yet, the population mourned, and his family's hearts broke, and everyone else hurt. Everyone but him, and nature. Which makes this week of mourning, the visitors, the press, all that much more annoying. He feigns his frowns, and he forces his emotions, as to not be the evil bastard who doesn't cry at his father's passing. His feelings are not his own. He was handed a script to abide by, but he is not much of an actor, and he's definitely not getting paid for his performance.

He just can't wait for it all to be done.

Chapter 2: His Royal Pain in the Ass

Chapter Summary

> Caleb's anxiety is budding at the impending UK trip, a social situation which he is neither excited nor prepared for. A week of being matched with whatever you would consider the opposite of his soulmate-- an enemy? A foe? Rivals? Needless to say: he is dreading the week to come.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Caleb’s favorite room in the White House is probably the Map Room.

Why? Well… mostly because that's the one no one ever expects him to choose.. Of course they have a library, and a home gym, and a grand kitchen and grander living space, but the map room… was something special. Something quiet.

He’s been asked in an interview what his favorite room in the mansion is. It was about three months after his father had been elected president, approximately two weeks since he moved into the White House. At the time, Caleb had already discovered his favorite room, but he had also discovered the peace in solitude that came with the room. He knew better than to admit to any reporters that his favorite room was the one that no one looked at for more than a second. So, in true 16 year old fashion, he said the bowling alley . Because that's what the reporters wanted to hear. They wanted him to brag about his lavish life and how he takes advantage of his adolescence spent in the most extravagant mansion in America.

He spends a decent amount of time in the map room. It was his homework spot when he was in high school. Since he began college, he has really taken to the room as a place to get away from his school stressors, and his brothers and sisters. A place to be alone. The room is sometimes in use by his father and his team, but that’s rare enough that he can typically get a little time there every day, away from the chaos of press, politics, and dinner parties.

He’ll be twenty by the end of summer, and he feels weird still living with his parents, but he also lives in dread of how the media will eat him alive if he dares to move out of the White House. . He was one of

the “littles” of his parent’s children. He wasn’t Andy or Bridgette, grown adults since Dad won the election, professionals in their fields. But he also wasn’t Danny or Ellie, who were the cutesy sweethearts of America. He was just in the middle. Young enough to be considered a kid when they moved in, but old enough to be independent now. Anyways, what more could he want than the White House? A place where people wait on you hand and foot, with staff for everything from cooking to an assistant who emails his professors for extensions on his assignments. He has everything a person could want, and more

And that’s the problem. Not to complain about having the easiest life possible, but… it sucks.

He sits in the map room without the pester of his older siblings, begging him to join them in political campaigns, or some other big name job outside of what he actually wants to do. Andrew wants him in politics, and Bridgette wants him to go to med school, and Hell, even his little brother Danny has high expectations for him, with some weird idea of Caleb becoming a big name professor at Harvard or something. The only one Caleb can really tolerate at this point is the youngest of his siblings, Eleanor, the only other kid that might feel half as ignored as he does. The only person he’s willing to share his favorite spot with.

They lay on the floor of the map room, eyes closed, breathing in time. If Caleb thinks hard enough, he could envision the former presidents glaring at them, two children of the first family, taking up a work space for relaxation, playing stupid memory games.

“Luanda,” Eleanor announces suddenly.

“Angola?” Caleb guesses. Eleanor hums an affirmative.

“Ganja.”

“Armenia…” Caleb hesitates. She doesn’t respond. “No- Azerbaijan.”

“There we go,” she nods. “Oh- I got a hard one. Ready?” Caleb waits for her to fill in a town or city, expecting something he would have to Google in order to remember. Something obscure, like Tuvalu, which he only knows of because it’s the most isolated country. “Paris.”

“You are such an idiot,” Caleb chuckles, running a hand over his face. “France.”

“No. Texas.”

“Shut up. Paris, Texas doesn’t count until we are doing the states,” Caleb waves her off. “Give me an actual hard one.”

“No. I’m bored,” she sighs, sitting up. “We get it. You know geography. Now let's do something fun already.”

“Like what?” Caleb chuckles dryly. “Wanna hang out at the bowling alley? Maybe pose for some pictures that *People Magazine* can slap on the cover of our teenage fun?”

“You are such a grump,” she stands, holding a hand out to him. “Yes. We’re going bowling. Just because you made fun of it. Congrats, you’re an idiot.”

“I’d rather die.”

“You might, if you don’t go bowling with me,” Eleanor threatens. “Up. Come on. It’s summer. It’s not like you have anything important to do. Why must you always be so difficult?”

“Why must you sound like Dad every time you don’t get your way?” Caleb bickers, but follows her out anyway. “You can bowl. I’ll sit there and watch you look stupid.”

They stroll the halls, passing those very portraits he practically grew up around. He remembers being young, maybe five or six, perusing the luxurious White House chambers with his mother and two older siblings, letting Mom give them a history lesson about every portrait, every room, telling them all the details about the White House that they might ever need to know. This was nine or ten years before they would move in-- Dad was just in the sitting presidents’ cabinet at that point. Hehad been a mayor in Georgia for a couple years, as well as spending two terms as a Georgia senator. Since then, he’s won the 2016 election, and was preparing to run for 2020.

Sometimes, he looks at his little sister, following the footsteps he once took, and he wonders how she does it. She didn’t have a slow introduction to the world. Dad was already a big name senator by the time she was born, and by the time he ran for President and actually won , she was only 9. At the time, she was a bit like the nation’s princess, being so sweet, little, and innocent, a little girl who shied behind her big brothers from the cameras, who was a poster child for Dad’s campaign, and soon to be every media outlet’s headline every time Dad did something mildly controversial. She’s likely overrun by the stress of the presidency and media coverage-- she didn’t sign up for any of this. She’s too young to be paid for the work she does

around here. Though, the way she carries her head high, and marches down these halls with purpose… it makes Caleb proud to be her brother.

He lounges on the couch while she bowls, as he promised, chucking kernels of popcorn in the air and catching it in his mouth. At some point, Danny must have gotten bored too, and joins Eleanor and Caleb in the bowling alley, giving Eleanor someone to compete against, and a motive to do better. It's almost two hours of bobbing pins, low-rolling, thunder-like throws, and sharp collisions, when Mom comes swirling in the room, a mess of notebooks and planners.

"Eleanor, did you ever respond to Diya about what you were wearing for the funeral?" Mom asks, projecting her voice over the bowling balls and pins.

"The black one," Eleanor says back. Caleb stifles a laugh.

"Eleanor, I beg you, just this once, take something seriously?" Mom pleads. Eleanor looks over her shoulder at her brother for approval, smiling at the sight of Caleb hiding his own amusement. "Caleb, please, stop encouraging her. You're supposed to be upstairs with your father anyways."

"He dismissed me. Sent me to, and I quote, *think about my future* ," Caleb says in response, propping his head up on his arm. "Popcorn?"

"No," Mom sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Daniel, you have-oh my goodness, you three will be the death of me. *Put the bowling ball down.* " And there goes the strict voice. Caleb rolls his eyes, while Eleanor and Danny both set their ball down. "Daniel, go up to the music room. Your tutor is probably worried sick wondering where you ran off to. Eleanor, please, go make sure your bags are packed, we fly out in the morning. I will not be holding the jet because you wanted to play some games. A man died."

"An old nazi died. Hardly counts as a man," Caleb mutters. Eleanor cracks a smile.

"You, cut it out," Mom smacks his leg. "You and I are going to go on a walk while your siblings tend to their scheduled duties." Caleb sighs, standing up and stuffing his hands in his pockets. "You two, run off."

"Have fun playing dress up for a dead dude," Caleb nudges his little sister as she passes him. She covers her laugh with a cough to avoid getting in more trouble with Mom.

Daniel and Eleanor march off like the good little robots the White House has turned them into. Daniel, likely to his music lessons, or perhaps even a class on English etiquette to prevent them from disgracing Dad's presidency in front of the crown. The moment they leave the room, the door creaking shut, Mom delivers a half-playful smack to the back of Caleb's head.

"Ma- "

"Don't you Ma me," she groans. "You and I need to have a talk about this… this attitude you have going on."

"I don't have a-" she gives him a look. One that reminds him of when they still lived in Atlanta, and he was about to do something unmistakably stupid that might tarnish Dad's image. A look that says *I know what you're thinking. The answer is no* .

He follows Mom as she takes them on a tour of the mansion. He's not sure when it happened, but at one point in his years of meandering the over decorated hallways, the White House got boring. The paintings became bland, and the priceless artifacts didn't matter, and their museum of a house just felt… boring. There was no splash of color, no fun decorations, no posters or photos that made it feel like a home, feel anything like the house back in Georgia. It feels like they live in a Smithsonian.

Mom takes them to the rose garden. As cheesy as it sounds, it was definitely Mom's favorite place to be. When he was little, he remembers laying in the grass with Mom, Andrew, and Bridgette. Daniel had only just been born, and was left with Nana back home in Georgia, the trip a little too important to bring an infant to. The four of them laid there in the dewey grass while Dad's meeting ran yet another hour long. It was well past Caleb's bed time, but he remembers how warm he felt in the early fall night under the stars, Mom whispering all the constellations, and planets, and galaxies they could see with the naked eye. He remembers being little, listening to his Mom talk about all the things she found fascinating, most often being history, gardening, and the night sky, and thinking she was the smartest person he'd ever meet.

It still holds true. Even if she's the dumbass who married his father and got trapped into having five children with him. She's still brilliant-- wise beyond years-- and humble about it, too.

She rests a hand on Caleb's back as they stroll under the awning, a

careful hand drifting across his shoulders. He knows what she wants to talk about before she even says it.

“I’ll behave,” Caleb insists. “I know this is a big deal.”

“I know you know,” she reassures. “You’re a smart boy. I’m sure you wouldn’t purposefully sabotage us like that.” He nods. “But I need you to do better than behave. You can’t just tolerate them. You have to at least pretend to get along.”

“I will.”

“That means not insulting their family. Especially the one who just died.”

“Oh- come on. He’s dead,” Caleb huffs. “And he was a nazi.”

“He was,” Mom sighs. “And he wasn’t a good person. And I’m sure that those kids hated him just as much as we do. But we cannot pick a fight with the crown during a funeral procession. Every country under the monarchy will be mourning, and with your father’s campaign launching… we don’t need any setbacks right now. If anything, I need you to play up the niceties.”

“No.”

“Please?” she looks up at him in the same damn way Eleanor always does. They’re practically twins. The same green eyes, almost hazel, and medium blond hair. The same thin nose and expressive eyebrows. “Honey, I know you don’t want to… but lord knows you could use a friend or two, and who knows? Maybe he’s not so bad-”

“Not so bad? He’s a direct descendant of the throne. They’re all bad. A bunch of inbred nazis with secret alcoholism and drug addictions that get glorified by the Daily Mail. I’m not going to be his friend. He’s a wolf in sheep's clothing.”

“Sometimes the ram is more aggressive than the dog…”

“Did you just-”

“Make a metaphor out of your metaphor? Yes of course,” she smiles. “Honey, I have a bachelors in philosophy and English. Don’t try to beat me with a biblical metaphor.”

“You have a bachelors in everything,” Caleb rolls his eyes. “I’ll play

friendly. But I won't be his friend. Not a chance in hell."

"You can get back to me on that after you spend a week glued to his side," Mom pats him on the back. "Who knows? Maybe he'll knock some sense into you, get you interested in public affairs again."

Not wasting even a second, she skirts away, not giving him a chance to argue. He starts to sputter a rebuttal, starts to say something along the lines of *but I hate politics* , but she's gone. Just as quick as she left, Diya is over his shoulder, padfolio tucked in her arm and grabbing him by the wrist to go inside. She talks his ear off, scolding him for the unpacked bags that have sat on his bed for a full week now, that she wasn't his servant, that he had to "pack his own damn socks and underwear".

She plants him in his room, gesturing to the closet and wardrobe, then to his empty suitcase.

"Fill that," she tells him simply. "I will be back in two hours, and if you aren't appropriately packed, I will personally ensure that you are seated directly beside the Queen's Grandson at every event for the next week. Maybe even stage a photo of you two in a loving embrace. You know… support your friend who just lost his father."

"I get it, I get it," he sighs, already going to his closet and plucking a button down and tossing it at the suitcase.

"You wrinkle those clothes I just ironed and I'll be sure to iron them with you as the ironing board," she threatens. He eyes her amusedly. "You think I won't?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," he says with a small chuckle. "Ellie didn't fit in the dress? Is that why you're stressed?"

"Damn kid grows like a weed," Diya complains, sitting on the edge of his bed, watching him properly fold the clothes as he puts them in. "Almost as bad as you were. I swear, we couldn't get anything tailored to those legs before you were suddenly too tall and made them look like capris."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Well, because your father grows little giants, we already accounted for the fact that she would grow out of the dress before she ever wore it, so I ended up having a second one in the next size up just in case."

“Putting that taxpayer money to good use,” Caleb laughs, shaking his head.

“Think of it as supporting small businesses. America’s sweetheart is seen wearing a beautiful dress at a large scale international event, everyone wonders where we bought it, they find the stylist and suddenly everyone is wearing some no-name from Fuck-All Kansas that we took a risk on,” Diya rants, suddenly pacing his room and helping him pack. It’s whilst she is in the middle of folding a pair of flannel pants that she realized what she was doing. He laughs at her pained expression.

When Eleanor is freed from her packing and try-on haul and adjustments, she joins them in Caleb’s room as they pack. She flops on his bed, changing the songs that were playing from his phone and scrolling through his stuff absentmindedly while Diya and Caleb pack together. Caleb groans as she skips past all his favorite songs and only plays the poppiest, most radio-y music he’s ever heard. She’s singing along to Taylor Swift, Harry Styles, and One Direction, stuff only downloaded on his phone to keep her entertained. Though, he won’t lie, a couple of them are painfully catchy and will be stuck in his head for the entirety of the flight to England.

For dinner that night, Mom and Dad are too busy preparing any kind of formalities they need to go through when they are with the crown, so Diya orders take out Chinese, and they all sit around on the floor of Caleb’s bedroom. Diya, Danny, Eleanor, and Caleb, all chatting about how much they dislike the Brits, whilst Diya also tries to remain her neutral self that she is paid to be. Caleb hoards the fried rice, as he tends to do, and Danny flung the occasional sweet and sour chicken at him. He almost always caught it in his mouth, though the stain on his carpet would suggest otherwise.

It’s always hard to sleep the night before they travel. He’s not sure what it is. He loves the flight-- he’s practically glued to the window for every second. Maybe it’s the social anxiety, knowing he’s not quite like his siblings. He doesn’t have Andrew’s charm, or Bridgette’s charismatic smile. He’s not quite as athletic and interesting as Danny, and he’s nothing like his sweet little sister who wins the hearts of total strangers with a single smile. No. He’s stuck in the middle of all his siblings, with little to his name, little to claim, other than being the son of the president. He’s an extra.

It’s not just the British Monarchy he struggles to get along with. It was the same way in school. He didn’t make friends very easily. He still

had a couple from back home, and he had one in particular who was the son of one of Dad's cabinet members– Quinn Hartford. He's known the boy since they were maybe ten and twelve, when they sat together in a game room, playing video games and competing over an air-hockey table.

Most of their time together was spent online, living half a country away, with Caleb in Georgia and Quinn in Texas, but since their fathers both went to the White House, he's now in the same city. Being away from him, a safe place, a person who knows his sense of humor, and who socializes in a way that mirror's Caleb's personality type… it was difficult. Caleb would love it if he could drag Quinn to all of these ridiculously fancy events, lighten the mood a bit. Quinn is far better socially than Caleb is, and could easily make friends with people like the Prince of England and all his royal pains in the ass.

Caleb watches the clock tick over from June 20th to the 21st, striking midnight. He can't help but dread what was to come for the following week. Pinned to Prince Dickhead's hip. Going to all his father's funeral events, and trying to not roll his eyes when the speeches inevitably call him a good man . Though, he's also not heartless. He knows it will be painfully awkward trying to despise the prince when the man is mourning his father. Shitty person or not, that kind of death hits you hard. A father is a father, no matter how terrible. Caleb has that experience, first hand.

He ends up texting Quinn. What do you even say to someone when their Dad dies?

His best friend responds, almost instantly. *Something along the lines of "i'm sorry for your loss"?? Unless they wanted it to happen. In that case, maybe "congrats".*

Caleb almost laughs. This is what he means by "needing Quinn's presence" . *Maybe I should be more specific. What the fuck am i supposed to talk to the prince of england about for the next week??? His dad died so i guess that means i have to be nice?*

A week. A whole week of trying to tolerate the British accent, and eat their bland food, and abiding by the British Monarchy rules and etiquette. Meal times with the Queen, bowing to "superiors", a week of dressing in nothing but full formal wear. He's not sure it would even be safe to shower while he's there in fear of being improper. The media will skin him alive if he dares step a toe out of line, and that's only if he survives Diya and Mom's wrath.

Quinn texts back. *Yes, you have to be nice. The guy probably didn't like him either, but don't be a dick. Try and make amends. Especially now that he is the direct line of descent from the crown. Last thing you want is a target on your head by the future king.*

Caleb sighs, running a hand over his face, and tucking his phone under his pillow. He rolled to his stomach and buried his face in the blankets, trying to force his brain to sleep, with the hopeful optimism that maybe, by some stroke of luck, this next week won't suck total ass.

Chapter End Notes

> Aaaaand a Caleb chapter, just to dip our toes into the characters. I hope this is halfway decent. I kind of want to balance some dry humor and serious, philosophical thought, so here's hoping this is an adequate representation of what I'm trying to do? You'd never be able to guess I'm a published author lmfao.
>
> Anyways, happy Monday. Enjoy :)

Chapter 3: The Chaos Between Us

Chapter Summary

> Day one of seven. The tension is high, and these two are trying their best to put out fires without getting themselves burned.

The first time Harrison ever interacted with the United States' President Chapman's middle child, Caleb, was when he was a teenager. Maybe thirteen? The kid was ten. It was six years before the Chapmans were elected into office, but they already had a clear shot to the White House, and they made their allegiances to the throne early.

It's not that Harrison disliked the child, per say. Harrison was older, and Caleb was closer in age with his younger sister, Katherine. He was not fond of the boy's energy, either. His knees were always bouncing, hands always fidgeting, eyes darting around, like a bird looking for its next meal. Like prey, hiding from its predator. Harrison and his sisters were taught to sit still, to not be so twitchy and anxious, reminded heavily that their appearance was everything. Either no one had that conversation with Caleb, or he just didn't care.

Maybe Harrison was a little jealous of it, too. He was upset that the boy that sat a couple feet away got away with his bouncing knees and tapping fingers. He was scolded for talking out of turn like Harrison would be, but no one glued him to his chair. No one forced him still, filling him with cement.

They interacted a couple times over the years, and never was Harrison fond of his presence. The boy was always stirred, like he wanted to run a lap, and he was so… *casual* . Slightly unbuttoned collared shirts, or wearing silver instead of gold… It was all so foreign to Harrison.

The two fought once at a Wimbledon event. Caleb was 17, Harrison 20. Harrison was a little too old to argue with a minor— he has to take some of that blame, unfortunately. But Harrison was just having a bad day. Is he not allowed to have bad days?

Needless to say, their argument blew up in their family's faces. It became a drag in the media. The British press despised Caleb, and likewise with the Americans to Harrison. They were torn to shreds. Harrison recalls sitting down with his mother, father, and Grandmother afterwards, as well as their legal team. They make him

recount the story, every detail. If he didn't remember it, the attorneys would write it down. That's their place to fill in a falsity to make Caleb out to be the bad guy. Dad never looked so unhappy to have a son. Gran never looked so eager to dismiss her grandson from her presence.

They've only really spoken two other times since the Wimbledon incident, both of which were accidental passes at political events with polite nods, fake smiles, and *hey how are you* 's before walking to opposite parts of the building. The further apart they were, the better. For everyone.

Harrison hasn't laid eyes on the President's son in nearly two years. Only the occasional headline from the press. He stuffs his hands deep into his pockets, rocking anxiously on his feet. He really doesn't want to deal with this right now.

"And Prince Harrison," their debriefer is saying, pulling him back to the present. He blinks and makes eye contact. "You have one job: play nice with Caleb. Got that? No fights. No bickering. I want to see a good handshake, pretty smiles, banter like old friends. We struck a deal with the White House to avoid political backlash. Don't mess that up."

"Understood," Harrison nods simply. "Be nice, no matter how annoying."

"Harrison," Mother sighs. "Get your hands out of your pockets, sweetheart. You know better. You're getting all anxious and jittery." Mum carefully straightens out his jacket and pushes his hair out of his eyes. "Start by not calling him annoying."

"Mum."

"Harrison," She mocks.

"One week. Be his best friend for one week. I attached a list of questions in the email I sent you. Answer all of them and I'll consider it a job well done," the debriefer says.

"Why do I have to do this?" Harrison asks finally. "Is this funeral stuff about us or not?"

"Harrison Henry," Mum scowls. "Cut this out. Now. You are too old for childish antics."

This is childish?

The four are ushered out to meet the Chapmans in a lengthy hallway in the palace. The Chapmans are fresh from meeting with the Queen to offer their condolences, and they look like it, too. They're serious. Stony. Well dressed. They're all in tailored suits and dresses. Lots of black. Harrison barely recognizes his rival when they approach one another. Two years had done him some good. He's grown into his ears, and his hair is more styled, and less of "whatever Mum cuts it as" style. He's not seventeen anymore.

Harrison doesn't think he hears any of their formalities. The greetings, the condolences, the well wishes, the offer of support. That's been the past few days anyways— the same few phrases. *How are you holding up? Are you okay? I'm sorry for your loss.*

It's almost a breath of relief when they all split up into their designated groups. Josephine with the elder Chapman siblings, Andrew Jr and Bridgette, and Kate with the younger siblings, Daniel and Eleanor. Mum trails off with President Chapman and the First Lady, while Harrison and Caleb wander the winding halls of the castle. They are dead silent. No small talk. No attempts at niceties. Harrison is unsure if it's pleasant or infuriating.

"When I was little, I researched the hell out of this stuff," Harrison's foe finally admits, stopping short at a painting on the wall. "It was intriguing. Just how luxurious and rich everything is."

"I'm sure you get it all now with the White House," Harrison says back, still pacing away. When he realizes his guest won't follow, he stops walking and turns to face him. "You coming?"

"Do we really have that intense of plans?" He asks in response. Harrison stammers for an answer, but comes up with nothing. "Who painted this?"

"Am I supposed to know?" Harrison raises an eyebrow. He frowns. "What is it?"

"You don't know your own artists?" Caleb asks, eyeing him down. Harrison felt his face flush. He looks away. "Gotcha. Okay. Let's go do… whatever it was your PR team planned for us."

"It'll be painless," Harrison humors his reluctance. "Otherwise I wouldn't do it either."

What they end up doing is some stupid lunch together out in London before a museum, because Harrison's PR team does, in fact, want to kill them. Hours of just… filling their voids of silences until they can part ways for the night.

"You're staring," Harrison states simply, not lifting his gaze from the menu. "What are you getting?"

"Sandwich and fries. You?" He props his chin up on his hand, his elbow rested against the table. Harrison eyes it silently before looking away. Damn Americans.

"Not sure. I'm not all that hungry."

"Get an appetizer and have it as lunch," Caleb shrugs. Harrison furrows his eyebrows. "You can do that, you know."

"Can you?" Harrison frowns, looking for a rule book on the menu. A sign that says you must purchase a full meal.

"Yeah. You could probably just order a soda if you really wanted. But it would look weird if I eat and you don't, so please tell me if you plan to do that."

"It already looks weird having us out to lunch together," Harrison shot back under his breath. Caleb goes still, unsure of how to respond to that. God he hates British people. He sent Quinn an *SOS: Stuck with an asshat* . "Will you put your phone away? Please. Meet me halfway, here."

"I think being here is half-way," Caleb rolls his eyes. "If you're asking me to abide by your family's etiquette, the answer is no. I'll do it in your home, and for your grandmother, but I'm out in public. I don't have to do that here."

"It's basic respect, not using your phone when you're interacting with someone. You give them your attention-"

"Harrison, I have ADHD. I will not hear a word you say if I do nothing but look into your eyes all day and listen to you talk about your feelings," Caleb states, setting his phone down, still fidgeting around slightly. Harrison frowns. Well now he's the asshole. "Pretend to like me and I'll pretend to like you. Also, order the damn appetizer. I refuse to eat alone."

"You are so petty," Harrison mutters, eyeing the menu again.

“I will walk out. Right now. Don’t test me."

“Make it easier on both of us and do it,” Harrison murmurs back. “Lord knows the British Press would have a field day with that footage.”

They’re silent again.

When the waitress comes around, she seems startled by the presence of the Prince of England and a member of the First Family of the United States at one of her tables. There’s a mild tremble to her hands, and she is frantically scribbling their small orders, fearful of messing them up. Harrison spots the way she keeps flipping her hair, trying to fix her appearance when she thinks they weren’t looking. She shot Caleb a rather beautiful smile, and Caleb smiled back.

Harrison is disgusted, witnessing his southern charm break through their tension. His *please* and *thank you’* s, his kind smiles and bright eyes, the way he appears so attentive when the waitress comes around… Harrison would mistake him for an entirely separate person if they hadn’t already argued in the few minutes they’ve been together.

“I think she likes you,” Harrison states simply, the smallest of smiles squirming up at the corner of his mouth, teasing. Caleb raises an eyebrow. “I saw that. You’re not as slick as you think.”

“She’s too young.”

“She’s no younger than you,” Harrison rolls his eyes, smiling still. “Come on. No shame in liking Europeans. Who knows, might do you some good on the ratings.”

“I’m not looking for a date,” Caleb shot back, his shifting in his seat more nervous than it was prior. “Just trying to make my family happy. Not start any fires. If anything, maybe put some out.” Harrison instinctively averted his eyes when Caleb made eye contact. “Listen. I am just as thrilled about this meetup as you are. But I’m doing my best to be tolerable, and I ask that you do the same.”

“Tolerable would be basic table manners,” Harrison says under his breath.

“Fine. I’ll do it,” Caleb shrugs, straightening out his spine, averting all his fidgets to his knees under the table, hidden from the public view. Harrison could feel the slight jostle, but it was barely noticeable in

comparison to his squirming. He moves his elbows off the table entirely and shoves his phone into his back pocket. He puts on one of those award-winning smiles that Harrison so often sees on American red carpets. “Better?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Harrison rolls his shoulders back. Caleb is scanning Harrison’s posture, grimacing slightly. “What?”

“You look like you just took a pole up your ass. Relax a little. You can be both polite and comfortable,” Caleb states.

“Oh my God,” Harrison huffs. “You are a miserable person to be around.”

“Says you. You have done nothing but complain since I got here,” Caleb cracks a small smirk. “C’mon. Tell me something interesting. Let’s talk about something other than how much we hate each other.”

“My PR team sent me with a list of questions to ask, if you’re really interested,” Harrison offers.

“You are… so robotic,” Caleb chuckles. “Okay. Fine. My favorite color is green, my middle name is Grey. I grew up with a dog and when I move out I plan to get a cat.”

“Your middle name is Grey?” Harrison furrows his eyebrows, suddenly intrigued. “That's so… brief.”

“Yeah. Definitely not Harrison Henry David Charles ,” he says, running his thumb over his nail, clearly desperate to move more.

“You’re allowed to move, Caleb,” Harrison sighs, feeling guilt eat away at his rival’s obvious discomfort. Caleb does a small shift in his seat, leaning forward onto the table, careful to not put too much of his forearm against the wood.

“Thank Christ,” Caleb sighs in relief, stopping suddenly as the waitress sets their drinks in front of them. “Thank you so much.”

“Of course, wave me down if you need anything else,” she says, beaming at the shred of attention. She definitely liked him. She skids away back to the kitchen. Caleb now takes to stirring his iced drink with his straw, more upbeat and energetic about having to be stuck with the aristocratic snob across from him.

“She likes you,” Harrison repeats. “I think you give off this… rebel

vibe that just gets people clinging to you and your image."

"They either cling or they pick," Caleb shrugs off. "Doesn't matter either way. I'm not interested. I got plenty of stuff to do, that doesn't include getting hung up on a person I'll never see."

"Sure," Harrison sips his water.

"Read me your list of questions. Do tell, what did your little team of press-coded robots come up with?"

"Really?" Harrison scoffs. He tries to envision the list in his mind. "Um… what's your dream-job?"

"Next question," Caleb says back simply.

"Don't know or don't want to admit it?" Harrison presses.

"Both? Neither? Shut up," Caleb blinks the thought away. "Next question."

While Harrison tries to ponder another bullet on his list of facts he should know about Caleb, Caleb is stuck in that vortex of wonder that he's been in since he moved to Washington DC.

It's silly to admit, but when he was a child, his dream-job was working at Disney. He was young, and he loved going to Disney with his grandma, and all the characters were so friendly, and even the janitors had a talent to show. He loved it there. Part of the magic is the intention behind every little motion, how every cog must turn to make it flow so effortlessly.

Now, he's a grown up. He isn't six anymore. He's in a land of top-one-percent and political backlash. His father is a leading republican, and Caleb is certainly not . If he was interested in politics in the slightest, he definitely wouldn't align himself with the Republican party. To be frank, he wasn't entirely fond of Democrats, either. Democrats, while being seen as "leftists" were really just glorified centrists. He doesn't want to go into politics, though. And he doesn't want to be a doctor. He's a year and a half into his college education, and he changes his majors more than he changes his clothes. He's thought about education, but education degrees are so testing centered, and he wouldn't be able to pass them. The praxis exam sounded like his own personal hell. He thought about going into some kind of art, whether it be theater, visual arts, musical arts, or even writing. But Dad would never approve of that. He would be better off telling Dad that he was

fond of AOC. Caleb liked taking some history classes, but some of the professors he would be stuck with were just draining and he couldn't bear to listen to their lectures.

"What is the favorite place you've lived?" Harrison asks next. Caleb blinks back to reality.

"Hmm…" Caleb searches the back of his mind. Does he dare tell Harrison the truth? Or should he say the White House, appease him the same way he does with the media? He recalls telling the press how much he loves the game room, and the bowling alley, and how peaceful and quiet the map room was in comparison. "Do you have to report back these answers?"

"I'll lie if you want," Harrison shrugs.

"Tell them the White House," Caleb says, swallowing his discomfort. "If they ask. Tell them that it's a teenager's dream."

"And your actual answer?" Harrison asks. Caleb was unsure if Harrison was actually interested, or just playing nice.

"Really?" Harrison nods. "Fine. Probably… When my Dad was campaigning, Danny, Ellie, and I, we all lived with my Grandma and Grandpa on my Mom's side, down in Jackson County, Florida. We could've stayed in the Atlanta house, because it had plenty of space, but… there's something a little extra cozy about being with my grandparents. My grandpa would make these huge breakfasts every morning. Not some kitchen staff that I didn't know. And we would all stay up doing puzzles together in the living room. And I never got to do any of that when I was in Atlanta. Either Dad would be out for work, or we were so busy campaigning, or something else… I don't know. Just… the closest thing that resembled a real childhood."

"That's… really cute," Harrison admits. Caleb groans, looking away. "You are soft."

"Am not. Go fuck yourself," Caleb decides to suddenly switch back to his previous self, elbows planted on the table and posture somewhat slumped. "I'm an American heathen and a political nightmare. Not soft."

"Oh, you are still a heathen and a nightmare, and there is a whole lot of chaos here," Harrison says, gesturing to his general self. "But you actually have a heart. I'm impressed. I don't really see any of the Chapmans being like that."

“Yeah, well, there's a good reason,” Caleb rolls his eyes. “This conversation didn’t happen.”

“It absolutely did,” Harrison smirks. “I’m holding this over you now. Forever.”

“Not a chance. You have no idea if any of what I said is even real,” Caleb shot back.

“Makes no difference. I can even spice it up a little. Give you some better lines,” Harrison continues to tease. “Caleb, you just bore your heart to your worst enemy.”

“You’re giving yourself too much credit, saying you’re my worst enemy,” Caleb scoffs. “You don’t have that much power, your majesty.”

Harrison grimaces at the phrasing. Both because of the improper use, and because he just… didn’t like it. Especially coming from someone like a Chapman. *Your Majesty* is used for Kings and Queens, people of the highest reign. Even a successor to the throne does not get called your majesty until they are to sit upon it. Truth be told, he’s always felt that this royalty business was just… silly. He did nothing to earn his title, nothing to earn his adoration. He was born, and that is all. He was born to a father who was born to a mother who was born to a father, and the line continues on. His blood is neither pure nor clean, and he is far from worthy of all that he is given.

“I actually came with a list of questions, too. Diya never rests,” Caleb clears his throat. “You don’t have to answer any of them though.”

“Will you be quizzed on it?” Harrison asks, folding his hands in his lap. Caleb shrugs. “How are you so nonchalant about all this? Sitting with a prince, and… and putting up with PR stunts to prevent a war?”

“I’ve done it forever. So have you. It’s the same carousel, no matter how many rides you take,” Caleb shrugs off.

“That was… surprisingly well worded.”

“My mother is a philosophy and an English professor for Georgetown,” Caleb says. “Every once in a while, she plants these stupid little metaphors in my head, just waiting for her knowledge to sprout in me.”

“Are you in University?” Harrison asks suddenly. Caleb nods, slowly,

unsure. “What are you studying?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Caleb admits, a sad smile on his face. Harrison nods. “I would love to do something similar to my Mom. Maybe get an English degree under my belt. Maybe something in the arts. Dad would have a conniption if I don’t study politics, so that’s probably not my best bet.”

“And you just… do what he tells you to do?” Harrison asks.

“Wouldn’t you?” Caleb shot back, then instantly regretted it.

Well, no. Harrison wouldn’t. Because his Dad is dead, hence the reason for Caleb being here in the first place.

“I guess,” Harrison shrugs, surprising Caleb.

They’re interrupted by plates sliding across the table in front of them. Caleb gave the waitress a smile and both said a bright *thank you* . She waves and goes back to her other tables. Harrison plucks a chip from his plate, studying it. He splits it in half to watch the steam roll off of the fluffed potato before taking a bite. When he finishes chewing, he resumes.

“Maybe. It’s not that I had any kind of vendetta against my father, but I certainly was not on his list of people he likes, you know?” Harrison poses, shrugging. “I did as he asked. I followed most of his rules. I behaved. Now he’s dead, so… I guess I make my own rules.”

“Yeah?” Caleb’s gaze softens. He studies Harrison closely, trying his hardest to understand even a second of Harrison’s life. Harrison seemed both tired and relaxed, like it’s been a challenging week, and yet, he doesn’t mind. “I’ve been avoiding asking about that. How are you… how are you guys holding up?”

“Genuine or for your team?” Harrison asks with an amused smile.

“Genuine.”

The smile falls.

“I don’t know,” Harrison shrugs. He looked around to see if there was anyone in too-close of proximity for this conversation. “Again. He was not my biggest fan. I wasn’t his. But a Dad is a Dad.”

“Fair enough.”

“Is it?” Harrison frowns. “It’s not like he was that much of a Dad. I barely saw him. Ever. I think I saw him three or four times a year, realistically. And he was far from a kind person. There’s that whole… guilt of associating with someone who hurt so many, you know?”

“I do,” Caleb reassures, picturing his own father.

“Yeah. Then you get it. I didn’t want him dead, but I sure as hell wanted all this stuff over with. So I guess in a way I did. Maybe that makes me a bad person,” Harrison shrugs, biting another fry. “My little sister usually has a harder time with these kinds of things, so I’m most worried about her.”

“And Josephine?”

“Josie is almost thirty years old, I don't think she could care less about any of this,” Harrison shakes his head. “She’s never been interested in the drama of it all. The only reason she hasn’t abruptly left the family and changed her identity is because she has this parental duty over us, thinking she has to make sure we’re as happy as she can make us. She’s so sick of the whole… monarchy crap. I’ll be impressed if she sticks around after this is all over.”

“Where would she go?” Caleb muses. Not because he doesn’t believe Harrison. More so because he does. He wants, he craves, the escape plan of others. He’s desperate to hear how others will get themselves out of the mess that he, too, is stuck in.

“I don’t know. Probably Switzerland. Somewhere remote and free of it all.” Harrison shrugs. “These chips are awful.”

“Well, to start, they’re fries,” Caleb teases, earning a fry to the face. “Listen here you British f-”

“Ah-ah- careful, Cameras around,” Harrison hums with a cheeky smile. Caleb laughs incredulously, unsure whether he is angry or amused. “I think this week might not suck as much as I thought.”

“I’d rather die than be stuck here with you,” Caleb says back. He’s not sure if he was lying or not.

“Which makes this even more fun.”

Chapter 4: The Funeral

Chapter Summary

> Going to the funeral for your enemy's father… it is just the recipe for disaster that it sounds like. Even after a peaceful conversation the day prior, the tension is thick.

Harrison does not believe that his sister is actually sad that dad died.

Maybe that makes him a terrible person, but truly. He was not worth Kate's tears, or blind panic, or hurt. Their father did not earn her heart or affection, and he certainly did not earn the title of *Dad* .

Kate has spent her life fighting her own thoughts, her own heart. She aches in ways that no doctor could heal, and she fights with herself over what emotions she can and can't feel. The ever-present media does not help her with her emotional stability, either. The crown has always suppressed mental illness and instability, and Kate was stuck in a whirlpool of panic.

This morning has been overwhelming, to say the least. Harrison is not a religious person, but when they were in the church that morning before Dad died, he did not pray for his father's peaceful transition, or to a God about the life he will live. He prayed for his sister's sanity, for her heart to heal.

Kate didn't sleep a wink the night prior to the funeral. It was showing in her bloodshot, glassy eyes, framed by deep circles no amount of concealer could hide. When they were in a room away from cameras, away from the public, he took her into a warm hug, let her sob her throat raw, let her hurt until it all shattered, until her bones were weak.

But she didn't care that Dad was dead. No. Of course not. His death is no different than when he was alive. Harrison's theory is that, really, Kate was hurting that Dad never really lived. She was missing a childhood she never had. She was missing the hugs from a father, the goodnight forehead-kisses, the bedtime stories, and playing frisbee in the park. She was aching for that normal childhood that so many others got, and she never had the chance to experience.

What makes it all that much more worse, is the fact that their agony had so little to do with the monarchy. The crown is not what made

Dad absent. Dad was simply heartless. He was a bastard who had children out of spite, a man who didn't bother to show up for their births, nevermind celebrate their life. Dad didn't abandon them because of his royal duties. Dad would gladly go on vacations without them, he would attend parties without them, he would live his best life in solitude, forgetting his wife and children.

And that is what killed Kate. The fact that they never knew the man who sat in that casket. They never knew their own flesh and blood.

"I know," Harrison exhales into the top of her head, careful to not disturb the beautiful hairstyling that took hours. "Hey, Kate? Katie. Look at me. Look up." He pulls back, hands still rested on her shoulders, a frown tugged on the corners of his lips. She met his eyes, sniffling, still trying to catch her breath. "You're going to be just fine. You and I are going to move past this. We can be happy without him." She nods rapidly. "Take a moment, focus just on getting some breath in your lungs."

Finally, Josephine found them, her shoulders slumping at the sight of their baby sister in yet another panic attack. Those damned things have been so restless these past several days.

"Hey," Josie rests a hand on her shoulder. "Take a seat. Are you feeling shaky?" She nods again. "Okay. Let's sit."

Harrison and Kate sit together on a padded bench, Josephine kneeling on the floor in front of Kate. The three of them, all experiencing the same pain, and yet, seemingly only Harrison is okay with it.

It's only another few minutes of waiting for Kate to get herself leveled out enough before they return to the funeral events, back in the church. Everyone is steadily taking their seats in various places around the church in the pews. Harrison eyes his speech he wrote out, and he still doesn't feel confidence in a single word of it. He won't have to speak it here, luckily. Not until the after event, which will take place in one of the palace ballrooms in Buckingham Palace. Far fewer people. Still a couple reporters, but not live coverage.

Harrison holds Kate around the shoulders throughout the nearly four hours of talking, between priests, the archbishop, and plenty of other Christian figure heads. Gran, eventually, steps up to say some words about her son.

Harrison wants to roll his eyes, as she describes him as a smart, brave, noble man. One who loved his life and family, one who worked his

hardest at all times, who never did any wrong. Not once did she mention the fact that there was never a single real family dinner. She didn't mention how he was working when his children were born, how he despised his wife and children, and busied himself in his study to avoid them.

Kate weeps quietly into Harrison's shoulder. He doesn't miss how her pain is emphasized at the lies. At the discussion of a man who raised his children to be leaders, to be kind and loving and full of life. That man didn't raise his children to be anything. Didn't raise his children at all.

When they are dispersed, Harrison's first concern is getting Kate ready for the shitstorm of press that will shove cameras and microphones in their face when they try to leave for the palace. He gifts her his handkerchief, and she dried her tears, hugging herself to his waist.

"Head high," Harrison murmurs in her ear as they start to walk down the center aisle, directly behind their grandmother. "Hum yourself a tune. Don't think about them. Think about home."

She does.

Caleb is watching from the center of the pews as Harrison consistently murmurs words of encouragement to his aching sister. Kate, who held her brother as a life line, who relied on his presence for stability. Caleb sees so much of Eleanor in Kate. Brave young girls who grew up in the spotlight, who feel more than they should, who are both beloved and criticized for every movement they make in their teenage years. Kate is 18, just a year younger than Caleb, and Eleanor isn't even thirteen yet, but they mirror one another so closely… Their lives are just a little too familiar.

"You good?" Eleanor nudges Caleb's ribs with her elbow. He nods, resting a hand on her shoulder and squeezing before looking away, down at his phone. He sent Quinn yet another text to update on his "British Adventures". *Is it weird that I actually feel kinda bad about all this?* Quinn, as always, responds rapidly. N *o. It just means you're feeling empathy for the first time. Congrats, shithead.*

The Chapmans go to lunch before following the rest of the invited guests to Buckingham Palace. His parents and eldest siblings discuss just how beautiful the procession was, and Mom talks about the poor princess . Caleb's head is on Harrison, trying to fill the shoes of someone who's always been absent. It's… painfully familiar to Caleb

with Eleanor. He gets it all, far more than he should.

The event began around dinner. They were able to change out of their all-black, but in exchange for black-tie formal wear. He's alone in his separate hotel room, thanking the lord for finally being considered an adult who deserves his own space. Quinn sat on Facetime as Caleb complained about the ridiculous pieces to a suit.

"Literally, no one cares what kind of tie you have, or if there's a wrinkle on your shirt under your jacket." Caleb huffs, adjusting how his shirt is tucked into his slacks.

"Clearly you do, or else you would stop whining about hating it," Quinn says in response, clicking away on his computer, only half-paying attention to his best friend. "What's that short story we had to read two semesters ago? About the old dude and the mountain and the American Revolution?"

" *Rip Van Winkle* ?" Caleb fills.

"Yes, thank you." And, just like that, Quinn is typing again, this time, faster.

"Are you seriously writing an essay right now?" Caleb asks with an amused laugh. "Trying to race me through this class?"

"It's not a race if you're not running," Quinn responds. "I just had too much time on my hands with you in England. Figured, might as well get some papers for our summer courses out of the way." Quinn spares a glance over at Caleb, who was now struggling with his tie. "Alright. I'm texting Diya. You're a lost cause."

"Fuck off," Caleb rolls his eyes. The Facetime pauses, and Caleb types out a text and sent it. Sure enough, within the next five minutes, Diya was with him, trying to teach him to tie a bowtie. Quinn laughed from the background at her struggle.

"Okay, sit your ass down, I'll do it for you, you absolute beanstalk of a boy," she sighs. He sank onto the edge of his bed, tipping his head up as she worked on the tie and got it successfully maneuvered around his throat. He grimaces at how tight it felt.

"Are you trying to choke me?" Caleb whines.

"If I wanted to choke you out, you would know," Diya responds, pulling back and flipping his collar down over the fabric. "Quinnie,

honey, we have to go, get back to that paper of yours. I will speak to you when we get home on Sunday."

"Yes Diya," Quinn says back with a small smile. "See you Sunday. Bye Cal."

The call ends. Caleb stuffed his phone into his pocket and let Diya do a once over for him. She checks his pockets to be sure he wasn't stashing anything that would get them in trouble, and comes away with just a wallet, his phone, and a pack of gum.

They meet the rest of his family in the lobby, with the only person they were still waiting on being his father. Dad comes down the elevator shortly after with a few of his staff members, all talking his ear off. They split into three cars. Caleb gets put with Danny and Eleanor, as per usual, though he won't complain, because this means he's not dealing with his older siblings, either.

"This dress is incredibly uncomfortable," Eleanor complains, sitting awkwardly. "Why couldn't I wear a suit, too?"

"Because Dad would rather die than let any of his kids look androgynous or break gender stereotypes," Caleb says under his breath. Eleanor shot him a look.

"Are you sure you're good? You're being weird."

"Am not," Caleb rolls his eyes. "This is perfectly normal. I'm just tired and wanna go home."

"Surely Harrison can't be *that* bad," Danny muses. "I think you're just dramatic."

"He sucks, and I have better shit to do than play dress up for a bunch of snobs."

"Dude, we are the snobs," Danny chuckles. "We're no better than them."

"Wanna bet?" Caleb scoffs.

When they arrive at the palace, they regroup and wait at the entrance alongside countless other international figureheads and their family's to be let in. Caleb has never seen so many personal protection officers in one room. Just about every single person in here had at least two people dedicated to them. Some gruesome, horrible part of Caleb

wanted to know what would happen if someone were to try something. How many guns would go off in a panic? How many people would be tackled to the floor? Do they have escape plans?

As they filter into the ballroom, they are given their seating assignments. Caleb's stomach churns, seeing that he and his family are not, in fact, all at the same table. Mom, Dad, Andy, Bridgette, and Danny would all be sat with some of the Germans at table five, and one of the closest tables to the Queen. Caleb would only be with Eleanor out of all the Chapmans at table 3.

They approach the table to see the prince and princesses already there.

"I'm starting to think your team does this on purpose," Caleb says to Harrison as he approaches, Eleanor at his side. They are all standing behind their chairs, just waiting for her majesty to sit her ass down, letting them all take the weight off their feet.

"I wouldn't be surprised. I think they like to watch us suffer," Harrison shrugs. He looks tired today. Worse than yesterday. "Uh, you've met my sisters before, right?"

"Very briefly. I think Katherine once threatened to replace my eye with a tennis ball, though," Caleb reminds, earning a little giggle from the youngest sibling.

"Wimbledon?" Harrison assumes. Caleb nods. "Figures. I wanted to replace your eye with a grenade. My sisters are far kinder than myself."

"Agreed."

"Aye-" Harrison furrows his eyebrows. "Don't start."

"Yes, because if I had any intentions of flirting with your sisters, I would do it in your presence," Caleb says sarcastically. Eleanor nudged him with her elbow. "Ow- hey. Sorry. Okay," Caleb puffs out a breath. "This is the youngest of the Chapman clan, and also my little prodigy. Ellie is just as much of a pain as I am. I'm sure you'll get along great."

"Oh, hush," Katherine waves Caleb off. "Eleanor and I actually had a lot of fun yesterday."

"You did?" Harrison is taken aback.

“Really now?” Caleb looks to his sister with wide eyes, frowning. “I was unaware you made such fast friends with Katherine, Eleanor .”

“Yeah,” Eleanor grins. “We did our nails. Harassed Danny. Made him talk about his drama.”

“He’s fifteen. His drama is if he has a math quiz in the morning,” Caleb responds.

“Can we backtrack to you getting along with his ‘ *prodigy’* ?” Harrison asks his little sister. She shrugs.

“It was fun. I don’t know why you complain so much about being a big sibling all the time. It was really fun running around with them yesterday,” Katherine insists. “Oh! I forgot to text you that video-”

Oh god, they exchanged phone numbers.

While Katherine and Eleanor dive headfirst into a conversation they never completed yesterday, Josephine, Harrison, and Caleb are left helpless, trying to fill their silences, trying to fill their voids of friendship that Katherine and Eleanor somehow already filled.

Queen Helena finally takes her seat after another minute, to which everyone follows in suit. Caleb is wedged between Harrison and Eleanor, though Eleanor is already enthusiastically discussing the royal dogs, as well as comparing similar stories in their lives. Caleb considered stabbing himself in the throat to put himself out of his misery. Lord knows there was plenty of cutlery in front of him to complete the mission.

“If your sister corrupts Kate, I will personally assure neither you nor your family never step foot in any of the countries that fall under our reign,” Harrison mutters under his breath.

“Trust me, I already want nothing to do with your family or their monarchy,” Caleb murmurs back, shooting Harrison a glare. “You’d be doing me a favor.”

“Then consider this a deal.”

“You two, whatever you’re doing, stop it,” Josephine snaps her fingers at them. Harrison averts his attention to his older sister, and Caleb to his place setting.

When people come around to run their food out, Caleb and Eleanor

are a little more verbally appreciative than their British counterparts, which is something that never fails to throw Caleb off. It's not that they simply dismissed their staff, or went unappreciative. But they don't give the big fake smile and enthusiasm that Eleanor and Caleb do.

Caleb never fails to catch Harrison looking at him when he does it, though.

If Caleb was honest, he wasn't all too hungry today. He was still in his head about… everything. His future. The way Harrison's life mirrors his. His sister, who is becoming best friends with the Princess of Edinburgh. His mind is full, and he's homesick enough that dinner didn't interest him.

Though, it was nice to see Princess Katherine laugh after how she seemed this morning. She had a nice laugh, too. She smiled ear to ear, eyes squinted, and her and Eleanor laughed together so happily, they could slowly see the room light up with the girls. Caleb, at one point, glanced to his father's table, to see if they were looking, and caught his dad's stare toward their table. Dad was smiling at the sight of the girls, having fun, being kids, laughing, joking, making friends.

He chooses to ignore how Dad's smile fell when he caught Caleb's eye.

Caleb averts his attention forward. Unfortunately, when he does that 180-turn from his father, he is immediately faced with the saddened look on Princess Josephine's face, and an unreadable expression on Harrison's.

They press on, because what other choice do they have?

Later, when everyone has finished eating, the older two children of the late Prince Charles step up to the podium to give their own little speech. Caleb was mildly concerned, having Kate sat at the table on her own.

She's not on her own though. She's got Eleanor.

He glances at the girls, and sure enough, Eleanor has scooted slightly closer, offering her gentle support.

Josephine says something insightful, something pretty, something that makes the room smile and not feel that dread of death, the inevitability of an end that they are unaware of. She introduces her brother to the podium to speak next. There's soft claps through the

transition before Harrison takes stage.

“Good evening,” Harrison greets with a polite smile. He does that a lot. Caleb’s not sure if it’s ever real. “Wakes, and viewings, and funerals… it can all get a little much. The speeches are raw, and emotional, and our hearts can be fragile, whether the loss was our own or not… So I figured I might take a moment to share a good memory, that might help us think of a brighter future, something that doesn’t feel as dreadful and overcast as it has.”

Harrison’s attention flickers to his notecard. Everything he’s about to say is a total lie, and he knows it. But that's what he was told to do. Inspire people, tell a good story, make it believable. Lie if you have to. Make a hero out of the ordinary.

“My seventh birthday, my father was in the hospital for a resection of a tumor on his left lung.” Truth. “It was a hard day to celebrate, knowing he would be in pain, feeling that absence at our side that day.” Truth. “To make up for that gap, my father wrote me a letter. I still have it, to this day. I brought it with me for this.” Half truth. There was a letter. It was signed as his father. But Dad did not write it. Either Mum or a staff person forged it . “It reads, *My Harrison* , ”

Deep breath.

If he thinks hard enough, he might be able to hear the voice of an elderly man, reading him a letter he never wrote, saying words he never thought.

“ *Today you turned seven, and I am endlessly proud of all that you accomplished at this point in your short life. You have been an incredible little brother to your sister, Josephine, and an even better big brother to Katie. You are intelligent beyond your years, you are kind, and full of heart, and never let a soul tell you no* .” Truth? Ish? “There’s plenty more in the letter, but… that’s not what matters. What I think about, when I think of that memory… is how it was written.” His eyes find his mother. She does not smile like the rest of the crowd. She knows that he knows. “He was unsure if he would ever come out of surgery. He was unsure if he would celebrate any of our birthdays again, nevermind the one he would most definitely miss for this operation. And yet, the first thing on his mind, above his health, above his fear, or pain, or work, was his family.”

It takes all of his heart, all of his soul, to not bear the truth. To not rip the letter to shreds, and announce that it was a lie, that his father was

nothing of the sort. Neither brave nor loving. Dad did not think of Harrison on his seventh birthday. Dad didn't think of Harrison ever.

"I think the message we take away from this is that… bad things will happen. Regardless of the life I was born into, we are painfully ordinary people, who experience the very same bad things that any other person may face. It is simply the way we look at our hardships that determine the path we follow. Do you plan to cower from your demons, let them consume you, plant the seeds of destruction until you are made of nothing but weeds? Or do you hold your head higher? Do you seek out the greater chances in life? Do you reach toward family, and friendship, and that warmth that only comes from a home?" Harrison folds his paper again and smiles that same polite smile. That same fake grin that only a politician would recognize "Every death, every wake, every funeral, it should all serve as a reminder that time is not kind, but we still have plenty of it. You just have to use it right. If you do, then nothing will ever be a waste."

The applause is deafening. He hates the attention. His grandmother stands to hug both him and his sister, a hand on Harrison's face.

"The letter wasn't-"

"I know," Harrison smiles sadly. "They don't need to know that." Gran nods.

"Good boy." She looks so proud. He wonders if this is what Dad would look like, if Dad were ever proud of him. "Go sit." He obeys, trailing back to his table, unfortunately stuck in Caleb's gaze the whole way there

"Cute stuff," Caleb mentions, hushed to avoid a scolding from Josephine.

"I hope you burn in hell," Harrison hisses back.

"I'll see you there."

Chapter 5: Two Boys in a Closet

Chapter Summary

> Caleb carries more trauma than he lets on, and Harrison carries more guilt than he can handle. One too sensitive, the other desensitized, makes for a stressful afternoon.
>
> (cw for mention of gun violence)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

None of this PR crap was really up Caleb's alley. He understood it at first— make them get along, or at least make them pretend to be friends for the cameras, to assure that their countries remain allies. The last thing England and America needed was a war over a petty rivalry blown out of proportion by their nationalists. But it feels like they should be done by now. The antics are over, they get along just fine. They've been shoulder to shoulder for six days, and Caleb leaves tomorrow. He's exhausted, and it's not even Harrison's fault. He's just been going, nonstop, for six days.

Though, today's event was a nice one. They would be in a cancer unit at a children's hospital. They were mostly split up, too, meaning Caleb didn't have to see Harrison's stupid face looking all smiley around a bunch of children. He didn't have to hear the softened tone of a usually cold and brusque man, or see the way Harrison's eyes squint when he smiles.

Caleb has been with a little boy named Amias for maybe an hour, because for some damn reason, the kid liked him. Honestly? Likewise. The child was cool. A sweet boy with lots of attitude and sass that just made Caleb laugh. Caleb had almost forgotten they were in a hospital, almost forgot the whole point of today, because quite frankly, Amias made his day.

"You're telling me that you've *never* had a Mars bar?" Amias asks, exasperated. "Like, never- never?"

"I've only been here a couple times," Caleb blushes as the child makes a bigger fuss about it.

"But it's God's greatest gift!" Amias exclaims, making Caleb laugh

harder. Amias's mother hasn't stopped smiling since Caleb arrived and started earning every laugh and jab from her ten year old son. He wonders how long it's been since she saw him in such a good mood. "Okay. I have a favor to ask of you. You go down to the gift shop when you finish doing your stuff today, and you grab a Mars bar. Take it home. Freeze it. Eat it after. You'll understand then."

"I might just do that," Caleb smirks. "I'll write to you. Let you know what I thought about it."

"I know you'll love it," Amias insists with a devilish grin. "And if you don't… hmm…"

"I owe you a Mars bar," Caleb offers. He nods quickly. "Deal?"

"Deal," Amias nods, shaking on it with a proud grin. Caleb catches movement from the corner of his eye and realizes that they had a friend watching them. Amias's eyes double in size at the sight of the prince, the potential future king of his country. His mother fumbled over her words in an attempt to greet him. Caleb… wanted him to leave. They were having plenty of fun without Harrison's presence. "Hello!"

"Hi there," Harrison greets back, joining them. "What are we talking about?"

"He's never had a Mars bar before!"

"Ludicrous," Harrison chuckles. "We'll have to change that before he leaves." Harrison pats Caleb's shoulder. Caleb resists the urge to smack him away.

"You do. It's one of the best things about England."

"Amias," his mother blushes a fierce shade of red. "Where are your manners, lovey?"

"I don't mind," Harrison insists. "You're not wrong. What else do you like?"

"The-the chippy... back home in Guirldford." Amias hums, sitting forward, elbows pressed into his knees, and the coziest looking Spiderman blanket around his shoulders. There's a spot on the blanket, rubbed to dust from a child trying to soothe himself on long nights. "It's the best one. Right Mummy?"

“The best,” she agrees, gently reaching out and tracing a discolored patch at the base of her son’s skull, her touch gentle against his bald head. Amias leans into it instinctively, eyes almost falling closed.

“Getting sleepy?” Caleb empathizes. Amias nods. “Good going, Harry. You bored the kid to sleep,” he teases Harrison with an elbow to the ribs, taking Harrison off guard.

“You sure? I think I rescued him from you,” Harrison shot back, an equally playful smile.

“Alright my friend. You go to sleep. I’ll be sure to tell you what I think when I finally try that candy.”

“It’s not a candy,” Amias insists through tired eyes. “It's chocolate .”

“Gotcha,” Caleb chuckles, and starts to back away. They both say a soft salutation and wish the mother best before parting. “Is there a reason you decided to make my new best friend fall asleep on us?” He asks as they inch down the hall, unable to look past the absolute stacks of PPOs and secret service milling about the hospital, all armed with various weaponry.

“My apologies, but we do have other things to do today than talk sweets with a child,” Harrison puffs out a breath. “Figured it was better me than my staff. I’ve been told they come off rather cold.”

“The royals? Cold? Never,” Caleb rolls his eyes. Harrison eyes him, doing his damned best to not scowl. Not while doing an event. Not here.

Caleb, as tired as he was, could get used to this. Making snide comments under his breath that the prince couldn’t lash out on him for. Being an asshole just for the hell of it, because they can’t afford a controversy. Bickering, and hating him, and loving every second of all of it.

“I cannot wait for you to-“

Bang.

Harrison has only heard the sound of a gun a few times, and all of them were in controlled environments for military training. He’s only shot a rifle once, and watched soldiers shoot them a fair amount of times. It’s loud, like cannons. Like sitting in a silent car, only for someone to scream abruptly.

He grew up not quite scared of the weapon, but definitely scared of what it could do. He was not afraid of a gun in the right hands— a trained soldier, who knew how to use it properly. They're banned in most of Europe for a reason, so what did he have to fear?

Caleb, on the other hand…

He grew up privileged, sure. That is a given. His trials and turmoils are far less than many. But he still grew up in a major city, in a state with one of the highest guns-to-person ratios. Not only that, but he was, as they call, "the troubled kid". He was the one who was at high risk for drug addiction, alcoholism, and incarceration. He's been caught up with some bad kids, and he's seen some unpleasant things.

He comes from a place of privilege. His childhood home was in a gated community. But he is no stranger to the sound of a gun. No matter how many times he's seen it go off, he doesn't think he'll ever feel okay with it. He's seen it in the right hands, but all it took was the one experience of it being in the wrong hands, and he's… he's good.

He's only ever touched a gun once, and it was in an effort to get it pointed away from his chest. It was also the closest proximity he's ever been to one while it went off. The bang was deafening. His ears rang. He remembers not knowing if he was dead or alive, because he couldn't think straight. He felt for his blood, and rather than wondering if he was shot, if he was going to die, he wondered what Mom would say. How mad Dad would be. How bad the press would come off.

Luckily, he was uninjured. The junkie who tried to kill him proceeded to collapse on the cement in a heap from the recoil. Caleb ran from the scene before police showed up. The ultimate ruling was that the stranger tried to kill himself and just… missed. The stranger survived despite his near-OD on a concoction of cocaine, alcohol, and meth.

Caleb has never looked at weapons, or hell, enjoyed even fireworks, the same. Ever. He finds a way to sit through the fireworks shows, but he would have no problem with never seeing them again.

Before Caleb could even gather his bearings, both PPOs and Secret Service agents were shoving Caleb and Harrison behind the nearest door for coverage. They stumble into one another and a wall, and Caleb desperately tries to get his footing, get his mind wrapped around what was happening.

"What the Hell was that?" Harrison asks for both of them, turning

around and trying the door handle. “Did they— they locked us in. What the fuck? Did they- what just-”

Shakily, Caleb felt the wall for a light switch, for a handle bar, for something to ground himself here. He feels like he could faint. Distantly, he heard Harrison murmuring complaints to himself. Caleb bites his knuckle, blinking himself into reality, focusing on breathing. His legs tremble. God, he hates small spaces.

“I swear, if someone is plotting a fuckin’ assassination the same week that my fucking Dad decides to die-“

“Shut the fuck up, please?” Caleb pleads all of a sudden. Harrison goes quiet, looking over his shoulder, squinting through the dark in hopes to make out any of Caleb’s features. The sliver of light from under the door doesn't do them any justice. “You getting upset will not help. I will only be more fucking freaked.”

Harrison hesitates. Very carefully, he reaches out, trying to find Caleb in the dark. They are disgustingly close, thanks to the maintenance closet being so horrifically small. Caleb directs his eyes upwards, trying to breathe.

“Hey, hey. You’re fine. What’s wrong?” Harrison carefully touches his arm. As if an instinctive motion, Harrison’s fingers brush over Caleb’s wrist, feeling for his erratic pulse. “Are you okay?”

“Shut up, please?” Caleb begs. Harrison does as told. Caleb’s breath is shaky, and hyperventilated. Finally, Caleb cranes away from Harrison’s touch, turning to face the wall, forehead pressed against the painted brick. He smooths a hand over the back of his neck. “Jesus.”

“Sit down. Breathe,” Harrison insists quietly from behind him. “I’ll sit too. Just take a seat. Shake it off.”

Harrison has not seen all that much gun violence in his life. He hasn’t seen much violence at all, being cooped up in a castle all day. But he’s seen panic. He’s seen the various ways a person can shut down. Kate has done it all, from loud, violent outbursts, that get herself hurt, and maybe bruising the bystanders trying to help her, to the silent, blank-faced panic, a girl trying to bind her anxiety to her chest, keep it to herself, hide it.

He knows a panic attack when he sees one.

Caleb does as told. He slid to the floor, shaking off the tremors before

resuming rubbing his own neck, trying to picture a world that was quiet. Quiet, and in the best way. Like an early morning sunrise. Quiet like mothers day breakfast. Quiet like midsummer hammock time at Grandma and Grandpa's house.

There's more popping, followed closely by running footsteps outside the door.

"Son of a bitch," Caleb laughs through his panicked tears, trying to pretend like he wasn't about to go into cardiac arrest. "I- phone. Where's my phone?"

"Right here. You dropped it," Harrison uses his phone light to find it, passing it over.

In the dim lighting, he can see just how freaked Caleb was getting. The tremor was more obvious with Caleb's phone screen illuminated, and Harrison saw the pink teeth marks on his knuckle that weren't there before. Caleb texts Diya first . *What the fuck is happening, and why am I in a closet* ? He sent the text and bites his knuckle again, knees rocking. *Self-regulate. Calm down. Pull yourself together.*

"Are you excited about going home? I usually get really tired after trips like this, where I have to put on a front at all times," Harrison says nonchalantly. Talk about something else. Get Caleb to stop panicking first, figure out why he's panicking later, Harrison thinks.

"Yeah," Caleb exhales, anxiously awaiting an answer from Diya. He sends another text. *Are we getting shot at or did someone pop a chip bag? Help me out here* . "It-It'll be nice being in the states. I can drop my guard a little, and…" Caleb stammers, unsure of what to say. "What the fuck, Harrison?" He lets out a long, wavered breath through his mouth. In again. Keep breathing. Slower, better, steadier. Harrison considers responding, considers comforting his… friend? Colleague? Visitor? He's not sure where they stand. And that's precisely why he stays quiet, allowing Caleb some time to feel this.

His blind panic is slowly easing into just a general discomfort. He's not hyperventilating after another couple minutes, and he wiped any escaped tears away. The shaking didn't cease, but that's okay. Long as he can breathe.

"I really hate these kinds of events," Harrison says after too much silence, trying his best to fill the voids of tension and fear. "I-I know it makes me sound like an arse, but- but I hate hospitals. A lot."

“Valid,” Caleb says back quietly.

“Is it? When it’s not about you, like, at all?” He’s here for the kids. To raise money, and have it go toward a good cause. And yet he whines like a bitch the entire time.

“Harrison?” Caleb interrupts. Harrison is quiet. “I am currently having a panic attack in a supply closet with the Prince of England. I have been stuck by said prince’s hip for the past week. It doesn’t get any *less about me* than this moment.” It’s a joke, Harrison realizes. Caleb is joking, giggling through his fear. Harrison does too, to lighten the mood.

“I was an asshole, and skipped a kid,” Harrison says back. Caleb raises an eyebrow with a half smile on his face. “His name was Charlie, and- and he had the same type of cancer as my Dad. Same prognosis. Damned kid has the same name. And I shut down…” Harrison felt his face heat up. “It’s not entirely comparable. You… freaking. And me ditching a dying child because of some personal issues. But I guess… I guess I’m trying to sympathize.”

“You’re doing a pretty good job at it,” Caleb assures, running a hand over his face. “All things considered. And I’d… I’d much rather think about you being a shitty person than think about being shot at again.”

It takes lots of restraint for Harrison to not repeat the word “ *again”* back to Caleb. Parrot it. Make him explain himself. If Caleb has done this whole “shooting” thing before, Harrison might want to know. He’s not sure what for, but he wants to know. Maybe because it means Caleb has experience, means Caleb can save them, similar to how he saved himself the first time. Though, the idea of Caleb being so often involved in shootings is rather disturbing.

At the very least, Harrison now knows why Caleb panicked. Damned kid has PTSD or something.

“I have a whole list of the times I’ve been a shitty person ,” Harrison chuckles to himself, continuing to make the room feel less intense. “Like, I don’t know, maybe starting with lying at my father’s funeral?”

“Meh. You’ve done worse,” Caleb shrugs, staring up at the ceiling in hopes training his mind on something fixated might help. His eyes finally adjusted to the dark. He fixates on a jug on the top shelf not quite sitting right. If it falls, it will land directly on Harrison’s head. “Everyone lies. It would be stupid to say you don’t.”

“I try not to make a habit of it-”

“Don’t we all?” Caleb frowns. “Come closer to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I need a teddy bear to snuggle,” Caleb says sarcastically. “Because if you jostle that shelf any more, you will have a gallon of bleach hit you in the head. And I refuse to have Prince Harrison breaking his neck tacked on my reputation.”

“What the-” Harrison squints and looks up. “Oh shit… yeah. Scoot over.”

The boys are shoulder to shoulder against a wall. Caleb doesn’t remember the last time he’s been this close to anyone , nevermind the prince of England. He’s not the touchiest of people. Not to say he doesn’t like hugs, or touch. He just… doesn’t have people who he’s okay doing that with. And this… is weird. Being so close to Harrison. Shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip. Their thighs bump against each other as Caleb continues to nervously rock and jostle. Though, Harrison has no aggression toward him this time as he does. Unlike before, whether it be at their lunch, or any of the PR events they’ve been to, where Caleb’s fidgets agitated Harrison to no end, Harrison paid Caleb no mind.

“Feeling better?” Harrison asks carefully. Caleb nods. “Wanna… wanna talk about whatever that was?”

“Not really,” Caleb clears his throat, pressing his head back against the wall. “No one knows. Not even Diya. So it’s probably best that I don’t spill some of my most traumatic memories to a stranger.”

“Okay,” Harrison shrugs. If anything, that made Harrison more curious. Why doesn’t anyone know what happened? How does Diya not know? How does no one know something as big as what Harrison assumes to be something gun-violence related. That sounds like a big thing to hide. “I hate small spaces.”

“Me too,” Caleb cracks a small smile, feeling ridiculous. “This whole thing is probably my worst fear.”

“Really?” Harrison hums. “I think… hmm. I don’t know what my worst fear is.”

“I’m not sure if I’m happy or sad for you,” Caleb chuckles.

“I’m trying to think of it, and I’m really drawing a blank,” Harrison insists, suddenly taken aback by the depths of his own mind, trying to invent nightmare scenarios.

There is not a single situation that he feels he would not be able to handle, though, because he’s already prepared himself for them all. His sisters dying-- that idea has been in his head since he learned that cancer was genetic. His mother dying-- it would happen eventually, no matter what, most likely in Harrison’s lifetime. Everyone hating him-- he’s amazed it hasn’t happened already. Being disowned, see previous thought. Dying, again, will happen eventually.

“I’m scared of… of a lot. But none of it is like a… a worst fear type of situation. I think I’m desensitized to all of that.”

“You’re telling me, right now, if someone waved a fuckin’ knife in your face, you would be fine?”

“I mean… no. I would be scared. But I’m gonna die no matter what,” Harrison insists.

“But you’d die at, like, twenty-- how old are you? Twenty eight? Instead of like eighty.”

“I’m twenty four, first of all,” Harrison laughs. “And, yeah. I guess my life would be short. But not much is going to change between twenty four and eighty. Not much there.”

“That’s… really sad. You know that, right?” Caleb scoffs. Harrison shrugs again. “Kids? A wife? Grandkids? None of that gets you excited?”

“It’s all a bit dreadful, isn’t it?” Harrison frowns. “Subjecting them to this. Being locked in a supply closet with the son of the President of the United States.”

“Just two boys in a closet,” Caleb agrees. Harrison couldn’t help but sputter out a laugh.

In an instant, that split second between Caleb’s joke and Harrison’s laugh, Caleb has it hit him. He *enjoys* Harrison. He enjoys Harrison’s presence. He’s comfortable. He’s… he’s close to happy.

He enjoys Harrison’s laugh, and the way he hides his smile and giggles behind his hand. He can’t see it, but he knows Harrison squinted his eyes as he laughed, and can envision the way his cheekbones seem to

lift. He has such a huge smile when he laughs like this, too.

“I- no. No. Don’t- that’s not what-“ Caleb giggles, arms folded around himself. “Stop! You’re such an idiot. I didn’t mean that. Shut up.”

His phone buzzes.

Just sent someone to get you guys. All clear.

Harrison and Caleb are still giggling over Caleb’s offhand comment when their secret service and PPOs arrive and let them free. Caleb tried to hide any prior nerves, now that he was out in daylight. They got squeezed into the same car on the way back to Kensington.

“Some stupid kids, setting off fireworks,” Diya says to him over the phone. “They were trying to give you guys a scare. I don’t think they realized how severe that is.”

“Dumbasses,” Caleb sighs, shrinking in his seat, adjusting the phone next to his ear. “What happened to them?”

“Not sure. Possibly a fine or something. It’s juvenile, so nothing long lasting,” Diya reassures. Caleb nods, even though she can’t see him. “You okay? You sound… weird.”

“Hmm?” Caleb blinks a couple times, looking between Harrison, who had been eyeing him for a while now, as well as their staff, then the window. “Yeah. No. Fine. Why?” He looks at his nails casually, anxiously picking at the skin.

“That doesn’t sound very promising, kiddo,” Diya responds. “You wanna talk about it?”

“Di, I’m good. Really. Just… jet lagged, and miss my bed,” Caleb huffs, closing his eyes. Diya is quiet for a moment. “You better not be texting my mother.”

“I’m always texting your mother,” Diya rolls her eyes. “We thought you and the Prince were going to be assassinated, and you’re acting funky. Of course I’m talking to her.”

“Don’t tell her that, she’ll freak, and then I’ll have to tell her that nothing is wrong and no one will believe me.” Caleb insists. “I’m a big boy. Let me breathe without my mother jumping at my throat.” There’s a moment of silence. “I’m going to text her you’ve gone crazy.”

“Go for it. I’m just doing my job,” Diya insists.

“Being an asshole that feels the need to know all my business?”

“No. Being an asshole who loves the hell out of you, and wants you to be safe and happy,” Diya corrects. “You’re meeting Katherine and Ellie in the castle. Be nice. And answer your mother when she calls you.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Caleb says before hanging up. “I swear, she’s almost as bad as my mother.”

“Worried?” Harrison assumes. Caleb nods. “At least you know someone cares.”

“She’s paid to care. It’s different,” Caleb tips his head back against the seat, eyes staying closed. Harrison watches Caleb’s adam's apple bob, studying his long eyelashes, and freckles, and the cluster of freckles on his throat. “You’re staring.”

It’s hard not to.

Chapter End Notes

> lil bit of background, lil bit of trauma to spice things up. harrison is feeling the guilt and the weight of his childhood on his shoulders, and caleb is still unsure how the hell he’s supposed to survive a world not really made with him in mind. Happy chapter 5 :)

Chapter 6: Just Harrison

Chapter Summary

> Texts, calls, late night chats… Caleb is restless, a flame in his gut, ignited by a certain British fuel that just makes him feel alive.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The remainder of their time is… normal. Bickering, of course. But normal. Harrison and Caleb make slights toward one another as their little sisters enjoy their time together, and sometimes, by total accident, they would be sat in a peaceful silence that can only resemble a budding acquaintance-ship. If that's even a word.

For their last day in London, Caleb, Harrison, Kate, and Eleanor spent it in Kensington. Eleanor was living her best life, being trampled by three dogs and a cat, all of whom took a liking to her. Harrison and Caleb sat together on the couch, surprisingly close. Maybe about a foot between them, both sat comfortably, leaning into the plush, ancient cushions. Harrison had propped his fluffy sock-clad feet on the coffee table, flicking through a book absentmindedly. Caleb propped his head up on his hand and watched him study the pages before flipping ahead.

"You're only half as evil as I thought you were," Caleb finally admits, in their own seclusion as the girls giggle evermore.

"Miraculous. You're just as annoying as I thought you were," Harrison murmurs, not looking up from his book. Caleb rolls his eyes, smiling to himself. "Stop that."

"What?"

"Plotting. I can just hear those creaky cogs turning in your head," Harrison glances up from his book for a split second, catching Caleb's gaze. "Definitely stop looking at me like that."

"Give me your phone."

"Huh?" He's taken aback by just how forward Caleb is. Damned Americans. "No."

“What do you think I’m gonna do with it? Send someone death threats? Give me your phone,” Caleb waves him over. Harrison watches him closely, studious, waiting to see the crime before it’s committed, trying to anticipate the trick. “Please.”

Harrison very carefully sets his phone in Caleb’s hand. He leans over to watch Caleb open it, and skillfully guess the password on the first try.

“How did you-”

“I’m smarter than you give me credit for,” Caleb says back, opening up Harrison’s contacts, and adding another one. He labels it *“Caleb !”* with six emojis, just to mess with him, and then sends himself a text from Harrison’s phone. “There. Now you have my number.”

“Oh,” Harrison blinks a couple times, taking his phone back as Caleb hands it off again. “...Thank you?”

“You’re welcome. Now, what should I set your name as?” Caleb opens his own texts creating a new contact for Harrison. “Maybe… hm…”

“How about just Harrison?” Harrison tries to hide his amusement behind his book.

“Fine. Just Harrison,” Caleb shrugs, typing in *Just Harrison* . “That's what you get for being a smartass.”

“Oh, I’ve been got,” Harrison rolls his eyes. “You hurt me so.”

“I’m sure of it,” Caleb chuckles. “Just don’t tell your guardsmen. They’ll have my head, King Louis XVI style.” Harrison looks at Caleb again. “You always look at me like I said something stupid.”

“No, I look at you like this because you said something smart,” Harrison scoffs. “I didn’t think you were capable of thinking about anything other than beer-pong and riots.”

“Ah yes, the epitome of America, underage drinking and loud noises,” Caleb laughs. Harrison finds himself smiling at the sight-- Caleb’s hair flipped back, a smile so grand, so perfect, and dimples on either side of his mouth. One cheek, flecked with freckles and a small scar, had two dimples, as opposed to one. Harrison didn’t know that was possible. It was fascinatingly beautiful. “Weren’t you just chastising me for staring? Stop that.” Caleb flicks Harrison’s knee.

Before Harrison could attempt to come up with a response, Diya arrives with a knock, escorted by staff members from the palace. Eleanor's face falls at the sight of their personal, well, everything , who would be sure to see them out of England, and hop onto their private plane back to the states.

"Alright goblins, times up," Diya claps her hands together. She is pleasantly surprised by the close proximity between the pair that, merely days ago, wanted to die at the idea of being in the same country as one another. "Your father is already on his way to the plane. Lets get a move on. I will not be fired because you kids have poor time management skills."

"Mom wouldn't let Dad fire you," Eleanor says back playfully, but stands from the floor. "We need to plan something. Maybe next time you come to us."

"Hopefully under better circumstances," Kate agrees, beaming. "Surely you two will want to hang out again soon too, right?"

"Not a chance in hell," Caleb says, standing.

"Rather die," Harrison contributes, flipping the page again.

"Right," Diya huffs. "Let's go, c'mon. Get a move on."

Kate and Eleanor part with a tight squeeze, and Caleb couldn't help but feel his chest soften, feel an easier breath run through him. Sure, it's far from a normal friendship, but it's about time Eleanor made a friend that wasn't one of her siblings or a staff member. Being home schooled, doing everything so restricted, it's not easy on her childhood experiences. If her being friends with a girl six years older than her makes her happy, then so be it.

By the time Caleb arrives at the tarmac for the plane, he has a text from Harrison.

Just Harrison: Did you really set your name in my phone to "Caleb !" with six emoticons?

Caleb bites his cheek to contain his devilish grin, pocketting his phone for the duration of the flight. *Emoticons* . What a dweeb.

It's terrifying to admit, but Caleb gets excited for precisely 5:00 PM. It's been approximately one week and three days since the UK trip,

and it's always 5:00 PM on the dot that he receives a text from his rival. Of course, occasionally, Harrison may text at other times of the day, but like clock-work, like an alarm set on his phone, he receives an IMessage notification from *Just Harrison* at 5:00PM on the dot. Not always does it lead to any intense conversation, but Caleb always anticipates it. He always sits there, staring at the clock for the last few minutes of the 4:00 PM's, and waits for the vibrate in his pocket at 5:00. He has to remind himself to not snag his phone from his pocket the instant he has the notification roll through, to not be too eager. Because it is, in fact, just Harrison. There is nothing overtly special about Harrison's texts. Caleb receives texts all day. But 5:00 PM is theirs.

On the first day, it was the day he landed back in DC. He didn't notice the time at first, still jet lagged, and feeling all five hours of time difference. That first text just read *Kate misses Eleanor. I think we're in trouble here. They're clingy already.* Day two, Caleb noticed that he sent the text at the exact same time. 5:00 PM, EST. *I just spent three hours listening to Katie and Josie talk about which political figureheads are the cutest. I am going to cut out my own eardrums* . Day three, a simple *hope your day was good* .

And thus, a pattern formed.

It's 5:00 PM on the 4th of July. Well, more so, 4:58PM. He's been sat in the Kennedy Rose Garden for about an hour, laid in the grass with Eleanor and Mom. Dad had a lot of 4th of July events today, so they would be celebrating the holiday without him until dinner.

Fireworks have been going off all day in the distance, making Caleb nauseous. Even in the heart of the city, where loud bangs, especially near so many government buildings, are not the best idea, they see beautiful flecks of red, blue, and gold glittering the sky— the only solace to the noise. At least the deep rumble in his ribs is satisfied by shining colors. Slowly, steadily, the rest of their family joins them. Even Andy finds the time to split away from work, and finds them cozied up on a blanket laid on the grass, watching the bright evening sky.

The clock strikes five. His phone buzzed.

"What's your alarm for?" Danny finally asks.

"Not an alarm," Caleb murmurs back, leaving his phone to sit for a moment. Don't be too eager. It's just Harrison.

“It’s every day at five. On the dot,” Danny said back. “Your phone goes off.”

“It’s a text,” Caleb says back, eyes closed, letting his skin feel the sun beat on it. He’s missing Georgia today, the humid July’s, the barbecues, the friends. Taking day trips to Grandma and Grandpa’s, jumping over the waves, and jumping from the empty docks.

“A text? Every day at the same time?” Danny smirks. “You got a girlfriend or something?”

“Leave it, Daniel,” Mom sighs, trying to enjoy her moment of peace with all five children and no husband.

“It’s been going on since we came back from the UK… Did you get along with Princess Katherine a little too well?” Bridgette teases.

“You better not,” Eleanor scowls.

“I don’t even have Kate’s number. It’s literally just Quinn getting out of class or something. Drop it,” Caleb says, his voice rough around the edges. His tone encouraged them to shut up and leave the conversation there. They do. After a couple moments, Caleb checks the text.

Just Harrison: Happy Independence Day, traitor scum.

Caleb cracks a small grin, texting back immediately.

*Caleb ! ******: fuck you, your tea, and your monarchy. U-S-A BABEY.*

Their exchange continues for a few minutes, playful banter of who resided in the better country, which accidentally develops into a historical discussion that reminded Caleb pretty heavily of his socratic seminars in college. Caleb doesn’t realize how long he’s been texting Harrison until staff calls that dinner was ready, and Caleb realizes it was nearing 6:00 PM.

*Caleb ! ******: brb, dinner time. Don't sleep yet, we’ll finish this in, like, thirty mins*

Just Harrison: deal.

Caleb takes his place at the table between Mom and Danny, thanking their staff as he passes them, and anxiously waiting for his father to join them so they can eat. Not because he was hungry, but because he

just wanted to go back to his conversation. He had so much pent up energy, so much he wanted to discuss, so many things to say and no one to say them to. Just Harrison.

Dad, as per usual, has them all hold hands and say grace. Caleb does the same thing he always does-- bow his head, close his eyes, let his mind wander into empty space, and then whisper an amen when everyone else does. He doesn't hear a word of the prayer.

"So, how was your event, dear?" Mom asks dad first as they all dug into their dinners.

"Smooth. Would have been better if my family bothered to make an appearance," Dad mutters under his breath. Caleb felt his gut stir. "How was your afternoon in the rose garden?"

"Very peaceful," Mom smiles, deciding to ignore Dad's hostility. "It's been years since the children and I all got to sit together like that. I think the last time we did anything of the sort was… hmm…" Mom considers for a moment. "Labor day, before the election. Eleanor was only 8. It's a nice change of pace. You should join us next time."

"Ah, yes, because I have that kind of time on my hands."

"You would if you made some," Mom says with a confident chill in her tone. "Between it all, I am never too busy to spend an hour with my children. You and I both made the agreement that they came before any job, any position."

"Yes, and we said that when I was a mayor. That's like the janitor of politics," Dad rolls his eyes. Caleb glances at his little siblings. He was used to it. Andy and Bridgette have done this before. But Danny and Eleanor, they're still kids. They're still sensitive, and breakable. "I got plenty of other shit on my plate. Don't start, Beatrice."

Caleb glanced up, careful to keep his head turned downward. He caught his mother's glare, and the death grip on her cutlery. Caleb is not a man who is scared of people, especially not someone as gentle and loving as his mother. But he pities the man who is on the other end of that scowl, and the reason she held a steak knife like she may throw it at someone.

"Eleanor, put some broccoli on your plate, please," Mom requests of his little sister. Eleanor is too afraid to disobey, and does as asked.

Dinner is tense and silent from there forward.

After dinner, Andrew and Dad go off to discuss something or another, and Caleb splits off to get away from that awkward brewing discomfort that typically comes with a family dinner. He sits in his bedroom by the window, wide open, and he pulls out his phone. He hopes to see texts of anticipation, Harrison waiting for Caleb to return. Instead, his notifications were empty.

Does he dare?

His thumb hovers over the contact. He was so tempted to just do it. Rip off the bandaid, admit that maybe, just maybe, he and Harrison were friends. But that was a painful fact to admit.

He taps the screen.

Harrison answers on the third ring.

“You called me,” Harrison says in mild surprise. Caleb cracks a grin.

“I did.”

“Hello,” Harrison greets finally. “How was your dinner? And are you being shot at?”

“No, that's the fireworks,” Caleb reassures, sitting back in his chair at his desk, eyeing the window, considering closing it for the night. “We never finished talking about the Boston Tea Party.”

“And you never answered me. How was your dinner?” Harrison sasses.

“It was dinner,” Caleb brushes off, swaying in his chair. “I think what really blows me away about all that though is the fact that so much tea was dumped. Like, enough that we would still be using it today. That’s how you throw a fucking party, dude.”

“Are you-“ Harrison began, then stopped abruptly. “Whatever. Yeah. No. Americans have always been wasteful heathens. Centuries worth of tea just dropped into the ocean because you didn’t wanna pay tax.”

“Sounds like a fair trade.”

“You could have just not paid the tax and used the tea. Why would you take out your aggression on tea leaves? They did nothing to you?”

“It was a show of protest , my dear Harrison,” Caleb insists. “You say Americans are wasteful, I disagree. Every square of that tea was used.

Just not in the way the English intended. It still got put in water. And it still served a purpose to the people on land. It's just, you know, in the ocean."

"People were starving-"

"Oh, don't you dare, Mister Prince of England ."

"Wales."

"Whatever," Caleb chuckles. "Your great great great Grandpa or whatever didn't give a damn how many people were malnourished. It was a war. You expect no one to die?"

"Spoken like a true right-wing American." There's a break of silence. Caleb is grimacing, unsure of how to recover from that. "Kidding. I'm kidding. I don't see you like that."

"Good," Caleb puffs out a breath. "That's- yeah. No. Not like that."

"What are you like?"

"That's… existential," Caleb says, considering his question Harrison will likely demand an answer to.

What is he like?

Is he… a leftist? Is he socialist? Is he pro or anti death penalty? Is he pro or anti anything? Is he political at all? Or is he artistic? Or maybe he's historical, or literate, or something else among the long list of qualities that everyone else seems to possess. He should know who he is, and yet…

"I don't know. Congrats. You've stumped me," Caleb hums, watching the explosion of colors high into the sky in the distance. He flinches at the loud pop. "Hang on. Closing the window,"

"Really now? I've successfully made *the* Caleb Chapman shut up?" Harrison jeers playfully, trying to avoid the discomfort. Harrison can't help but think about a week ago, being stuck in the supply closet. Caleb's panic.

Caleb laughs along to Harrison's jeer. These jabs feel so different now. Now that they've shared laughter, and quiet, and they've fallen into a comfortable routine of texts.

"All it took was a phone call?" Harrison continues.

Caleb's twentieth birthday was rapidly approaching, barely a few weeks away. He should know these things about himself. His hobbies, his interests. The things that make him a unique person. And yet, he feels factory-made, like a copy of every other white boy in America. What makes him himself?

"What's your interest in coming to America?" Caleb finally asks. Harrison considers the statement for a moment, unsure if he even heard it right.

"My… my interest?"

"Yes. Your interest," Caleb repeats. "If you were invited, would you come?"

"What are you even talking about?" Harrison asks hesitantly. "I-sure? Yes. I guess?"

"Cool. Then it's a plan."

"What's a plan?" Harrison asks, exasperated by Caleb's antics.

"You'll see. Patience, my friend," Caleb cracks a smile. "I gotta go. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"I want you to know, you are the biggest pain in my arse alive," Harrison states.

"Likewise," Caleb agrees before ending the call. It's only a few minutes until Caleb gets a text. *Just Harrison* writes *When will you tell me about this mysterious 'America' invite?*

Caleb decides against answering the text, for both his fun and his peace of mind. Get this Just Harrison guy out of his head for a few minutes. He, instead, goes through his school work that he has to submit for his summer classes, get it all over with, and hopefully, get his mind off of the "great outdoors", also known as an anxiety central station.

He sticks some earbuds in and chews on his pen cap as he works on a paper he forgot entirely about. It's due in two days, and he has plenty of time, but there's no better time than the present, when he needs something new to think about.

He writes almost four full pages for the assignment (a critical analysis on *The Lottery*), when Diya slides in his room. She knocks on his wall

to announce her presence. He glances up and then back to his laptop, finishing his thought. The amount of red-dotted-lines on the document was… overwhelming, to say the least.

“Are you doing okay?” Diya asks. Caleb tunes her out, obsessively fixing his spelling errors and grammatical issues. “Hon.”

“Hm?” Caleb takes out an earbud, not looking up from his screen.

“Are you doing okay?” She repeats. He nods. “You look tense.”

“If you had dinner with my father, you’d be tense too,” Caleb says back, finishing a sentence. “Can you read this paper for me, tell me if it looks okay?”

“Share the document. I’ll look at it before bed,” Diya assures. He nods, sharing his paper with her email before closing the laptop entirely. She sits on the edge of his bed, careful to not get too close. She is looking at him, as if expecting him to explode. “Is it just your Dad?”

“Huh?” He glances at his texts, the most recent one from Harrison at the top of his notifications. He considers responding with an elusive emoji, like a smiley face, or a thumbs up.

“Caleb Grey, will you please look at me?” He grimaces at the use of his middle name. He looks up at her, arms carefully folding around himself, sitting back against his headboard. “You haven’t been right since last Monday. What the heck is going on in there?”

“Nothing. Really,” Caleb insists.

“That might work for your busy mother, but not for me,” Diya deadpans. “I get that she might work too much to get too invested, but this *is* my work.”

“Really. I’m-I’m fine,” Caleb says again. She is seeing straight through his lies. “It was a scare. It freaked me out. I’m fine.”

“Is your anxiety getting bad again?”

“Diya,” Caleb groans, slouching down, hiding his face in his hands. “I’m fine. Leave me alone. Please.”

“If you want me to contact your psych from Atlanta, I can. Even if you’re fine, it doesn’t hurt staying in touch with her.”

Caleb doesn’t entertain her worrying anymore. He just puts his

headphones in and opens his laptop again. Exasperated, Diya watches the boy block her out, ignoring her existence entirely.

She watches him continue in hopes that perhaps, with her persistence, he might open up. She reads the essay he shared with her, leaving comments in it to the side for his unclear lines, as well as kind affirmations for particularly well formatted paragraphs.

No luck, Caleb keeps quiet. Eventually, he mutters that he is getting tired, and Diya lets him be.

Caleb, though, doesn't sleep. Not a damn wink.

He spent the entire night stuck on Twitter, Instagram, and news apps, watching all other verified creators and accounts talk about their accomplishments. Seeing the PR-managed account for Prince Harrison praise Harrison for some charity event he was going to hold this weekend. Seeing the articles about the firework incident last week.

He receives a text close to sunrise.

Just Harrison: its literally 4:26 am for you. why are you awake

Caleb cracks a tired smile, pulling his comforter to his chin. He sent back a response. *I'm not awake. This is a figment of your imagination.* Caleb sits there for a moment, watching Harrison's text bubble bounce. *Wait. How do you know I'm awake?*

Harrison, from 3,600 miles away, felt his cheeks flame red. He hides a smile behind his palm, eyeing up at his older sister, who watched him closely.

"Who are you texting?" Josie asks with a small smirk. Harrison glances down at his phone, sending a quick text saying: *you have the "active one minute ago" on instagram, idiot* .

"No one special," Harrison shrugs. "Just Caleb."

Chapter End Notes

> im getting excited to start writing fluff !! having fun with these characters, and very excited to see how they turn out :)

Chapter 7: The Invite

Chapter Summary

> Something shows up in the mail for Harrison, and quite honestly, he's not sure the last time he felt this excited for a party.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His 5:00PM texts became 6:00 AM and 5:00 PM. Caleb, more often than not, was awake at 6:00AM, either because he didn't sleep in the first place, or because he woke up too early. He was so excited for the text, so excited to talk to Harrison, to have a friend … it's like Christmas morning, every day.

It's almost noon, and Caleb is sitting with his little siblings and Diya in a study room. Eleanor was being a champion with her Spanish work, and Caleb had been miserable all afternoon, just staring at his term paper, waiting for 5:00PM. Quinn would be around that night to review together, so hopefully he will offer better insight.

"You haven't written anything in ten minutes," Diya states, pointing to the hyperlinked *last edit* button, which showed all his most recent actions in the document. He's afraid to admit that, ten minutes ago, his last edit was just deleting an accidental second period, that he hasn't actually done anything in probably half an hour. "Give me one good sentence and you can take a break."

"I'm not five."

"You sure as hell act like it," Diya shot back. Danny snickers. Eleanor was too focused on her Spanish quiz to care. "Daniel, eyes on your geometry."

"Yes ma'am," Danny flushes and stuffs his nose back into his textbook. Caleb stares at his screen for a full minute, unmotivated, no idea what to do or what to say.

"Are you still in there?" Diya asks. Simultaneously, his phone started to ring with a Facetime call. "Oh for heaven's sake-"

"Hey," Caleb pops his earbuds in and answers the call before he can be told not to. His siblings both look at him as he stands and scurries

away. “You are saving me from finishing a term paper. What’s up?”

“ *What’s up* ?” Harrison deadpans. “Are you kidding me? What the hell is this?” Caleb glances down at his phone as he wove through staff down the hall. Harrison was struggling to maintain a straight face as he held up two pieces of cardstock, beautifully designed, outlined in gold framing and beautiful calligraphy. “Caleb.”

“Harrison,” Caleb mocks, finally sliding into his bedroom and plopping down at his desk. “That, my friend, is an invitation. I’m sure having no friends makes it a rare sight for you to see, but what you do is read it and decide whether or not you can come to the event.”

“You’re an arse,” Harrison states simply, looking at the card again. “You share a birthday with your brother?”

“Yeah,” Caleb shrugs. “Danny was born the day before my birthday. Little attention hog.” He props his feet up on his desk, watching Harrison squint and furrow his brows as he reads the invitation. “If you look closely, there’s actually two of them. One for you and one for Kate, so the girls can see each other, too.”

“What kind of event is it?” Harrison asks next, a certain edge to his tone, but a small smile quirking up the side of his face.

“It’s a birthday party, idiot,” Caleb rolls his eyes. “You come. We party. We eat cake. We hang out. You leave.”

“You realize how stupid a day trip to the United States sounds, right?”

“Then come for a couple days!” Caleb insists, smiling stupidly, watching Harrison’s face go pink. “Come on over on the twenty ninth. Leave on like, I don’t know, the fourth? The party is on the thirtieth for Danny, stay for my actual birthday.”

“And do what?”

“Hang out? Be a person?” Caleb offers. Harrison hesitates. “Kate will want to see Ellie. I want to see you. Consider it just being a group of friends together. The four of us can go see a movie, or go out to eat, or stay at whatever hotel you book and drink until we forget the rest of the world exists.”

“You are so stupid,” Harrison laughs. Caleb, for the first time in weeks, can see it. The squint to his eyes. The way his cheeks lift. The rosiness to his skin. His smile lines. He has an unnaturally perfect

smile. Something people would pay money to have. Maybe he did. “You’re underage.”

“Be my plug,” Caleb shrugs. “You’re old. You can buy alcohol in the states.”

“Ah yes, because that is both legal and safe,” Harrison teases.

Caleb is waiting for his response, waiting for him to say yes. Say that he’s coming, that he’s down for a party. It will be a fun one, too. Danny’s fifteenth. Caleb turns 20. They both invited at least a hundred people each. He’s pretty sure he has at least two musicians coming just to hang out. It will be fun. Not his style in the slightest, but that’s why he invited Harrison. He didn’t want noise and craziness. He wanted a little bit of chaos, sure. But he’s never been a partier.

“Are you coming or not?” Caleb finally asks. “I asked you, what, a week ago...? If you were invited to America, would you come? You said yes then. Will you come to America, have some fun, do something other than sit in a dusty castle and hate your life?”

“You are so dramatic,” Harrison sighs, considering his options for a long moment. He’s staring up at his ceiling, his hand lost in his mass of hair, fingers tangled in the messy waves. Caleb wonders if Harrison forgot this was a Facetime, rather than audio call. At that thought, Caleb becomes acutely aware of his own presentation. He tries to look casual, but struggles. It all feels forced. “Fine.”

“Fine?” Caleb’s eyes light up. Harrison glances down at his phone just in time to catch it.

If he wasn’t mistaken, Harrison would have thought he was struck by lightning. His hair stood on end, and he got goosebumps. He doesn’t remember the last time he’s been to a party, the last time he had a friend. He’s not sure he’s ever really had that. Even in University, his “friends” were just climbing the social ladder, just seeking to be on the next magazine cover, get their name heard.

What more can Caleb gain from their friendship? Adoration from the Brits? Unlikely. All of England, and most of the Queen’s territories hate him regardless, because the world is rather hostile toward the Chapmans as a whole. In all honesty, Harrison wasn’t sure what made Caleb any different from Andrew, or Andrew Jr. What sets the middle son apart from all the other politicians, corrupt, money hungry, power hungry, clawing their way through the ranks, a death grip on totality?

In reality, nothing.

He is their flesh and blood. He is his father's DNA. Caleb has his father's eyes and crisp jaw. His rough hands. But his mind is so multifaceted. He is fluid. He is not rigid in his morals and beliefs, and to some that's a flaw, but to Harrison… It's a sign of independence. He is not a blind follower.

"Fine," Harrison gives in, biting his cheek to withhold a smile of his own. "I'll talk to Kate and my staff. I'll be there on July 29th."

"Really?"

There's a fire in Caleb's eyes. A passion that no extinguisher would be able to put out. If anything, he's a grease fire-- very easy to fuel. It's dangerous, and Harrison can't afford to get burned.

But *why* , is the question. Why can't he learn the hard way-- not to mix water with a grease fire? Why can't he fuel it?

Let the fire burn. There's very little that separates flames from life. Why kill it?

The call lasts almost two hours, when Diya abruptly interrupts the conversation to remind Caleb that his term paper was due in *six hours god dammit* . Harrison lets him get whisked away for his school work, and finds something else to busy him. Cooking, perhaps.

He sticks the invites to the fridge with a magnet that resembles their cat. He digs through his cupboards for dinner, unsure of what he'd be interested in. He knows he doesn't want whatever the big kitchen was catering. He wanted something authentic. Something home cooked. Problem: he's far from a cook. Sitting on the counter, he reads the instructions on a box of rice, formulating some kind of plan in his head.

"You realize Maiari put on a beautiful chicken dinner, right?" Mum asks, standing in the doorway of the kitchen, watching her son closely.

"Not interested," Harrison murmurs. "Do we have rosemary?"

"Are you really trying to cook?"

"Yes," Harrison nods curtly. "And I'm asking if we have rosemary, Mum."

“No, we ran out on Tuesday when I made that pasta dish for the Scotts.” She approaches, taking the box from his hands. She sets it aside, gently ghosting her fingers over her son’s cheek, a sad smile on her face. Harrison avoids making eye contact, pulling away from her touch. “Want to tell me what's in your head, lovey?”

“Nothing,” Harrison insists. She tries to reach for him again. “Don’t-” His breath hitches, retracting and hopping off the counter. “I don’t want to be touched, but thank you for caring.” He crosses the kitchen and opens the pantry. He’s decided he wants pasta. Plain pasta. Maybe some garlic and onions for flavoring. Something plain to settle his stomach. Mum stood still, taken aback.

Euphemia was the arent most present for her children in their short lives, but even then, her presence was patchy. It’s a given-- if you are raised by royals, you will not be raised *by the royals* . You will be raised by nannies, by tutors, and teachers, the staff members who keep you out of trouble. Euphemia tucked her children in most nights. She read bedtime stories, and ate dinner with her children. There was typically only ever one empty chair at dinner, and the children learned to accept it.

But she was far from the traditional mother. She was not the mother that Euphemia herself had growing up. Euphemia’s mother was doting. Euphemia’s mother went to all of her school events, made her breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily, and typically ate at least two of those three meals with her. Euphemia’s mother hugged her multiple times a day, talked to her, and knew her. Euphemia was one of four, all three of her siblings being brothers, close in age. But her mother never let any of those kids feel unloved, never let their self worth descend.

Euphemia cannot say she knows her son.

She can say she loves her son. All parents love their children to some extent. Even the worst of parents, the most abusive, the most absent, love the prospect of children, or in the very least, love the *power* over their children. They are far from good parents, and this doesn’t mean the children *feel* loved . Unfortunately, oftentimes, it's not the right kind. Even Harrison would say, his father loved something about being a father, and it was the control he had over his brother because of it.

Euphemia knows about her children. She knows Josephine is smart, and independent, and dislikes the monarchy and her title. And she

knows her son is a genius, and Harrison has interest in computers and mathematics, and she knows he loves his sisters. And she knows while her youngest struggles, knows Katherine is a perfect princess, regardless of what the media thinks.

But she doesn't know her children.

She has no idea what Harrison thinks and feels at this very moment. Tomorrow will be one month since his father died, and not once did they speak about how he felt. She is unsure if he feels relieved, or sad, or scared. She doesn't know how he feels about the future, or his own genetics, the potential of carrying a cancerous gene, or if he is at all scared of what this means, now that the crown will be descended directly to Josephine. She could ask. She should ask.

But she's scared of knowing. There are twenty four, almost twenty five years worth of life that she knows so little about. She is scared of what this will mean for their future as a family.

Euphemia had little interest in being a duchess, and even less interest in raising the future monarchs. She was born into a decently well off family on a farm in Scotland, with goats, cows, and plenty of chickens. Harrison hasn't seen her childhood home-- she always goes without him. But Josephine says it was beautiful. Kate's never been, either.

She was born into wealth, and she was traditionally beautiful. She had plenty of suitors, plenty of people interested in her. Plenty of men to have grown a family with, plenty of people who would love her right. She's not sure what led her to the Prince, the next King of England. She's not sure what led her to have three children with him, especially after seeing how little he cared for the first one. But she did it.

She did it all, and she regrets most of it.

She regrets not marrying a commoner. She regrets not having a little Josephine, Harrison, and Katherine with a man who was respectful to his family. Who knows-- perhaps those wouldn't be their names at all? They wouldn't have to abide by traditional royalty names . Maybe Josephine would be named after Euphemia's mother, Antigone Eve. Maybe Harrison would have been named after a combination of Poppa and Mum's late biological father, Thaddeuss Wilfred, and Kate would be Saoirse Euphemia, because maybe Euphemia wanted a child named after her, too.

She does not know the boy in front of her.

It is not the son she dreamed of. Not the boy that would remind her of her wild brothers and eccentric father. He is not a humble craftsman, or the soft spoken librarian. He's just as quiet as his father, just as secluded to his own thoughts. He does not share his words, he does not share his ideas, or creations. He holds them all in his chest, until one day, he dies with them unspoken. Whether purposeful or out of guilt, no one will know.

Harrison looks like his mother, most definitely. But he is more his father than anyone would like to admit.

"Let me help you cook," Mum offers finally, a last attempt at bonding with her son, a last attempt to love and feel loved by, perhaps not Charles, but a piece of him. She will never remarry-- her one husband was awful enough. But maybe, just maybe, he instilled something good in these kids.

"Sure," Harrison murmurs back. Mum broke out into an excited smile, immediately bringing out pots and pans.

She takes charge, quietly teaching her son how to make one of her favorite pasta dishes, one that was not the simple onions and garlic Harrison aimed for. But maybe he'll like it better! Maybe… maybe it will be a recipe, a piece of love, passed through generations. From Nana, to Mum, to Harrison, to Harrison's future children. An unstoppable force. A motivation for his future.

They cook quietly. Mum plays music from the radio, quietly humming and dancing, drifting across their personal kitchen. Eventually, she encourages Harrison to let her take his hand. He rolls his eyes and smiles, letting his mother force him to dance and move. This is the closest Harrison has ever felt to normal. Planning to go to a friend's birthday party, cooking with his mother, and dancing in the kitchen. He's close to being a person, but not quite.

Mum notices the invitation on the fridge, but decides not to fuss. Even after seeing the Chapman name beautifully printed onto the cardstock, she allows him his fun, and allows him his normalcy. She just wants to see that smile, see if, perhaps, he carries any of his father's looks. Maybe he smiles like Charles.

She will never know. She rarely saw either.

Chapter End Notes

Was this a filler? Perhaps. Did I still enjoy writing it? Absolutely.

Is it really a filler if it gives the characters more of a chance to get to know one another and feel things? Idk. I just feel weird jumping straight into fluff, but kinda like RWRB, this is FAST PACED. NOT a slowburn. I dont have the patience to write slow burns lol

I know I've updated like,,,, DAILY this weekend,,,, but probably dont anticipate an update tomorrow just because im in classes on tues/thurs and university is kicking my ass. anyways, happy monday. thank you for the support thus far :,)

Chapter 8: Contractually Obligated

Chapter Summary

> The summer air is warmer in DC than Harrison thought it would be. Or perhaps his hands are just clammy— the world may never know.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the weeks leading up to Harrison's trip to America, he barely slept. Kate is bouncing around, everywhere she goes, elated to see her friend and to get out of the castle. Harrison thinks Kate might have packed a full week before the actual trip. He wants to make fun of her, tease her for this change of attitude, but instead, he relishes in the moment. He hasn't seen her this happy in years.

He's been to America before. He's been just about everywhere before. He's seen the White House, and he's seen Washington DC, and he's done the flight several times. But for the first time, he was excited to do it. He was happy to see the city, and America's history, all displayed in front of him. He wanted to see the first family, and the skyline from his hotel, and march around a foreign city, eyes wide with wonder and beauty.

He packs his bag a few days early, too.

Caleb sat on the other end of the phone line one evening. They've been quiet for a couple minutes, lots of typing on Caleb's end, and lots of rustling on Harrison's. Harrison tries to hide that he was packing his suitcase, so as to not give Caleb the impression that he was too eager. But Caleb could tell, hearing the flick of a pair of pants as he tried to fold them, and the occasional suitcase zip. Caleb stays quiet, his gut swirling with excitement. He smiled so much his cheeks began to hurt, and if anyone looked too closely, they would think he was crazy.

"Can I read you part of this paper and you tell me if it sounds stupid?" Caleb finally asks, hitting the enter button on his keyboard to start a new paragraph.

"What's it on?"

“I have no idea. Something about Neitzche,” Caleb admits. Harrison snickers to himself, waiting for Caleb to read off his paragraph. “I wrote, *‘ To paraphrase, Neitzche says that people have this idea that they intrinsically know the details and “truths” of how things function, when in actuality, people are able to describe functionalities through metaphor as language. This doesn’t make it an inherent truth, but instead breaks down the specificities of metaphor. ’* Is that weird?”

“It sounds normal,” Harrison shrugs. “But you said the word *things* . You should avoid words like things, stuff, and so forth.”

“But Neitzche says things !” Caleb defends. “I think- right? Hang on. Let me find a quote…” Harrison laughs as Caleb frantically skims the text for a direct quote that includes the word things. At some point, he does, in fact, mention a sentence with it, where the word is equally as vague as its use in Caleb’s paper. “See! I’m not stupid!”

“I never said you were stupid,” Harrison says calmly, shaking his head. “If he says things , then surely you can, too.”

“Oh thank God,” Caleb huffs. “Because I don’t know what *things* really are. And it’s too late into the term to ask.”

“What class is this for?” Harrison questions carefully.

“Crit Theory. The professor is really cool, but I have not paid attention to a single lecture,” Caleb puffs out a breath and immediately dives back into working. “Quinn! Hand me the-the thing-”

“You have someone with you?” Harrison blinks, suddenly taken aback at the prospect of someone else being able to hear him like this. Softened. Casual. Commonly. Rapidly, his guard shoots back up, his chest turns cold, his posture stiffens, and even if it was just an audio call, his face goes slack. He is not supposed to seem sweet and gentle.

“Just Quinn,” Caleb responds, as if that makes any difference. Harrison has never met a “Quinn”. Who the hell is that? Harrison stays quiet. “Ugh- Harrison, don’t be a priss. Quinn is my best friend. He’s glued to my hip. Almost as bad as Diya.” Harrison, if he wasn’t mistaken, could hear the grin on Caleb’s face. For some reason, Harrison feels better learning that Quinn was a boy. “That being said, the motherfucker will not hand me my shit even though he can easily reach it.”

“I’m not your slave,” a man in the background says with his mouthful. “Hi Harrison. Nice to meet you again.” Again? Harrison would

remember a *Quinn* . Especially if he was the same trouble that Caleb causes in Harrison's life.

Harrison is uncomfortable in the phone call, like he's been caught in a place he shouldn't be. Guilty of being a person, rather than a prince. He's sure this Quinn fellow is lovely. Sure he is a good friend to Caleb. But it's taking time to warm up to one obnoxious American. He wasn't necessarily in the mindset of being stuck with a second Caleb. The first one was annoying enough.

In the background, Quinn and Caleb chat between the two of them, and Harrison stays quiet, listening to their voices merge. It's interesting, hearing the similar speech patterns, and the way they berate one another so cruelly. Is that friendship to them? Being assholes, jokingly?

Harrison is unsure if he's feeling left out, or maybe a little too close-in. He's never done any of this before-- friendships treated so casually, especially as two men in the spotlight. He's both intimidated and challenged by the prospect of this social hell that he was rapidly plummeting into, without any form of savior.

Caleb's summer semester finals were scheduled to be done the day Harrison and Kate were supposed to fly in. It felt ridiculous, knowing he had the prince and princess of England coming to spend time with him, but he would have to step away to take an exam. He considered emailing his professor something along the lines of *sorry, got international politics to attend to-- raincheck for next Friday?* But he's used that excuse enough this semester, between the funeral and a trip to New Mexico for Dad's campaign. It only made Caleb regret signing up for the summer session even more than he already did. Perhaps it was karma for teasing Quinn.

Eleanor hasn't stopped raving about having Kate over (and Harrison, of course too, but she's mostly excited about Kate). Mom was elated that Eleanor and Caleb had friends. Dad was even happier that one of the aforementioned friends was the damned kid that made the Chapmans a sour name in the mouths of the English. Surely approval ratings will improve with the budding best friendship, right?

Needless to say, Dad stops him before Harrison and Kate arrive. Legal matters. Presidential matters. It's always work-based. Caleb doesn't remember the last time his father summoned him to his office for something personal, something good. Maybe it was shortly after they

moved in, and he wanted to show off to his son. Show how far hard work gets you. Maybe it was a late night dinner when Dad needed a different brain to talk at. One that won't offer confusing solutions in response, because Caleb wouldn't dare talk politics with his father.

"I need you to sign something for me," Dad states simply from behind his desk, pushing a contract forward with a ballpoint pen resting on top. "Initial at the bottom and sign the last page."

"What is it?"

"Just do it," Dad demands. Caleb nods slowly, looking at the contract. It was four pages of *DO NOT FIGHT WITH THE PRINCE OF ENGLAND.* It went on to specify all that would be considered a breach of contract. It includes, but is not limited to, public insults, conspiring, pranks, tone deaf jokes, and offensive comments. All things that Caleb tends to do with his friends, especially Quinn.

"And what happens if the contract breaks?" He wasn't planning on harassing Harrison, on tarnishing a brand new friendship, but he wanted to know the repercussions before he signs a contract. Fair enough, right?

Wrong .

"You better hope we don't come to that," Dad threatens.

"And if I just… don't sign it?" Caleb wraps his arms around himself. Dad looks at him incredulously. "He's my friend. I don't have to do this with Quinn, or-or any of my other friends, why would I-"

"For my peace of mind, perhaps?" Dad snaps. "So I know that you take my job seriously? Do you take me seriously? Get your head out of your ass, Caleb. It's not about you. It's about making sure that I get re-elected next year. Am I understood?"

"Nothing is going to happen, Dad," Caleb insists, softening. Dad had a vein bulging in his forehead, eyes dark as he scowled and pulled his brows taught. He was a caricature of the classic TV villain-- tense to the point of shaking, aggressive to the point of wrinkles, and anything but lenient. "I'm not signing a contract this vague. There is bound to be a legal issue here somewhere. Something that I could get caught on, or-or-"

"Are you planning on lawyering-up against your own father? Against the President of the United States?" Dad presses. Caleb takes a small

step back.

“No- Dad. No. I’m just-“ he could feel his blood pressure rising. God, he wants to leave now. “I’m not signing it. There is nothing forcing me to sign it. There’s no repercussions if I *don’t* sign it. Harrison and I are friends, end of statement.”

“What are you planning?” Dad instantly accuses. Caleb’s stomach drops, taking another small step back. He would feel better if Mom was here. Hell, he might even feel better if Andy was here. Maybe Andy was a pretty stunning replica of his father, but anyone who could bear witness to such ridiculousness would be appreciated. “What are you plotting? Trying to ruin my campaign? Orchestrating something, maybe some form of espionage with the British Monarchy to-“

“You’re being a lunatic,” Caleb interrupts, giving up. “Be pissed at me all you want. Accusing me of a federal offense is a new low, though. We’ll revisit this after my birthday is done.”

Caleb leaves his office, careful to avoid Diya as she approaches, Dad hurling swears and demanding his return. She stops short at the sight of the soon-to-be birthday boy, tears welled in his eyes, just barely held back. He was walking quickly, shaking the tremors from his fingertips in hopes all his anxiety built up over the years would simply fling off, like droplets of water.. She tries to call out for him, reach for his arm, but he keeps walking. When she steps into the oval office, she’s regretting not following the child in an instant, and instead spends her time coaxing the president from his temper tantrum, in hopes that her presence will keep the president from throttling his son.

Caleb hides in the solarium. As he tends to after a fight with his father, he was missing Georgia again. He missed the sunlight that burnt his skin every summer, the overcrowded city, the ability to run the streets carelessly, with no one tailing him. Hell, he even missed the humidity, the way his skin would be slick with sweat and poolwater, hair damp from random swims.

He curls up on the crisp white sectional in the sun room, the skylight pouring fresh rays onto his face, catching his hair just the right way, making him look blonder than he is. A textbook lies in his lap, and he’s been trying his damned hardest to read it in preparation for his exam tonight, but his mind is everywhere else. His mind is in Disney World, with a dole whip and green balloon, and he’s in London, sat

hip to hip with Prince Harrison of Wales in a supply closet, fearing for their lives, and somehow giggling through it, and he's in the oval office, his father looking like lasers may beam from his eyes, and his hair may set aflame. He's in the future, with his little sister and their new friends, playing a game of UNO, or drinking in a hotel room, slurred speech and giggles keeping him afloat.

What's the point of a college degree if he sees every possibility except for a solid career? He sees the past, the present, and the ever present future, but he does not see *his* future. He doesn't see a job, and a family, and a cat. He doesn't see a barely-maintained garden, or a white picket fence. He's… he's just here. Forever.

It's a steady 85 outside, making the sun room even warmer. When it rains, he sits here to watch it splatter against the windows, trying to envision a hurricane passing through. When it's hot outside, he's here to sit in the sunrays, maybe coax more freckles out. When it's cold, he's here to bake in the oil heating and light while it's too cold outside to do anything else.

"You are one hell of a party," a voice greets from behind him. He lifts his gaze from the book, glancing over his shoulder and smiling.

"Did you land early?" Caleb asks, instantly turning in his seat, leaning against the cushions, infatuated with the tired eyes and sleepy smile that comes from his once-foe. Harrison approaches, nodding to the couch, silently asking permission to sit. "Sit down. It's nice and warm here."

"It's like the pits of Hell," Harrison jokes, settling on the sectional with Caleb. "Our sisters will be the downfall of our countries, I swear. I would not be surprised if they are plotting an anarchist coup as we speak."

"That's my Ellie," Caleb smirks, glancing down at his book again. "Sorry. I have a final in, like, four hours."

"Please," Harrison waves off, taking the textbook. "Here. Let's quiz you. Oh- Oh! I didn't know you took computer science classes!"

Harrison's eyes widened dramatically, that same perfect smile taking up his entire face. Caleb wonders why he doesn't smile more in his official portraits and photographs. It gave way to a personality, his eyes a window into his soul, his livelihood, all things Caleb didn't think Harrison possessed just a few months ago. Harrison sits criss-cross on the couch, knees bouncing happily, fingers sliding along the

page to read the text, as if it were a thrilling mystery novel on its final pages, rather than a stuffy textbook from 2014.

Harrison skims the important chapters first to get a grip on what specifically Caleb was trying to study for, before he starts pulling out terms and quizzing him on different portions of each chapter. He would read a subtitle of a chapter and ask Caleb to describe what it would be leading into, and he would read a couple lines and ask Caleb to express what it meant in his own words.

The sun shifts in the sky, glaring through the skylight and onto Harrison's fluffed waves and warm eyes. Caleb would call it a coincidence, but it somehow felt like a grace of God, guiding him to a future he didn't see before.

Caleb wonders how it's possible that so much changed in the almost two months of knowing Harrison. Of properly knowing him, that is. They rapidly evolved from strangers who despised one another to two boys in Caleb's house, smiling, talking quietly under the mid-afternoon sun, eager to be in each other's presence. Harrison, who took a random flight to America to celebrate Caleb's birthday with him, who smiles only at Caleb, who only texts Caleb, outside of his staff and sisters.

Four hours pass rapidly, and Caleb takes his exam there in the solarium, sat on the floor, his laptop propped on a coffee table. Harrison, Eleanor, and Kate all lounge around the room together for moral support, quiet to allow him his concentration. Harrison studies the way Caleb chews on his knuckles, lips, tongue, cheek, anything he can, in an attempt to concentrate. It was cute.

Not cute.

That's not how you describe the president of the United States' son, especially not as a prince. He is not cute. Wrong word.

Caleb is… fascinating. Interesting. Odd, in the best ways possible.

He's not helping himself in the slightest.

Caleb gets through his exam rather slowly. His chewing habit gets significantly worse the closer he gets to the end of his exam. Harrison watches from the other side of the sectional as he sits even closer to the screen, biting his thumb, knees bouncing. He glances at the clock what feels like thirty times in those last few minutes. The sound of other classmates leaving the call was overwhelming him. He races to

finish, and starts rapidly typing in a textbox. Long answer questions are his own personal nightmare. He knows he is allowed extra time-- it's one of the accommodations required both for his status and his ADHD, but it's mortifying, being the last one done, and he tries to avoid using his accommodations as much as possible.

Finally, he hits enter. He sits back, reading over his own writing. He took a deep breath and hits submit. Slowly, the exam loads, and he leaves the call, wanting to get his professor's eyes off him as soon as humanly possible. The multiple choice grade pops up instantly.

"How'd you do?" Eleanor asks, treading carefully, watching Caleb continue to bite his thumb, continue to jostle and sit in silence. "Hey, it's no big deal-- you pushed yourself to do the summer classes, you don't have to excel at everything you do. Don't beat yourself up over it."

"It's fine," Caleb shrugs, trying to brush off his disappointment. "This is only the multiple choice. I still have the short answer and long answers to get graded." He sighs, sitting back against the couch, frowning. "78."

"That's good! Hey!" Eleanor exclaims, breaking out in a smile. "Literally last night you were saying you thought you would fail. That's almost a B!"

"It's a C+," Caleb huffs, closing the laptop. "It's fine."

"It's better than fine," Harrison jostles his shoulder. Caleb tries to hide his small smile by looking away. "C's are average. Not bad. There is nothing bad about being average at a subject." Caleb glances up at him, quirking up an eyebrow. "I don't know about you, but I'd much rather be just average at every subject then fail."

"But it's not a good grade."

"Well, luckily, that's not your only class," Harrison insists. "What was your grade on the Neitzche paper?"

"Hm?" Caleb furrows his eyebrows. "You remembered that?"

"You read it to me. What was the grade?" Harrison insists. Caleb's cheeks heat up, feeling all the eyes on him. "What was the grade!"

"98%," Caleb admits softly.

“Look at that!” Harrison shook his shoulder again. “So what if this isn’t for you. Who knows-- maybe you’re just not a good test-taker. You did awesome studying, you know your content, and you’re smart as hell. Don’t let a stupid 78-percent tell you any different.”

“Thank you,” he says, blushing, shrinking down, smiling. “Can we do something? Celebrate the end of the semester? Because I need to not think about school for once.”

“Yes! Let’s go do something!” Eleanor insists. “I’m inviting Quinn and Danny.”

“Why Danny?” Caleb groans, forcing himself upright from his spot on the floor, pulling out his phone. “Danny will be annoying.”

“Because it’s Danny’s birthday tomorrow. Shut up.” Eleanor sent a couple texts and smiles. “Danny’s in. Quinn is actually upstairs with him, too. We’re meeting in the kitchen.”

“Good. I’m hungry,” Caleb stretches his arms high above his head, his shirt rising up on his torso. He reaches for the beam above his head, his fingertips just barely brushing it. Harrison looks away quickly before anyone catches him staring. “I bet, if I ask, they’ll make that pasta thing they made a couple weeks ago.”

“I already asked,” Eleanor reassures. Like a child facing a mound of presents on Christmas morning, Caleb’s face lights up, and he is instantly walking faster.

Rather than a formal dinner around a table, saying grace, tense conversation asking about everyone’s day, the four of them stand about the kitchen with their plates. Caleb was sat on the counter, Harrison leaning against it beside him. Kate and Eleanor were sat at the island. Finally, Danny and Quinn decide to join them.

“Oh! Is today a Liz-day?” Danny asks happily, grabbing a serving spoon and instantly loading a plate.

“Will you please say hello before you dive headfirst into the food,” Caleb pushed his little brother by the shoulder.

“Hi, welcome to America. Now give me a fucking fork,” Danny held a hand out. Caleb nudges Harrison to move and pulls out two more forks, one for each of them. “I love a good-ol’ Liz-day.”

“Liz-day?” Kate asks hesitantly.

“We cycle through a couple different chefs,” Eleanor shrugs. “Liz is everyone’s favorite. She’s super Italian and just loads us up with the best food.”

“She also sneaks us a lot of Italian candies when we ask nicely,” Danny contributes through a full mouth.

“Danny,” Caleb groans.

“Sorry,” he says, swallowing. “Oh, uh- did anyone ever introduce Quinn and them?”

“No, because my best friend is an ass,” Quinn says, leaning against the counter, waiting expectantly. Caleb stays quiet, shrugging it off. “*Ahem* ?”

“You got allergies?” Caleb asks, smirking. Quinn rolls his eyes. “Harrison, Katherine, my idiot best friend, Quinn. Quinten. Call him shitstain for all I care.”

“Do not,” Harrison points to Kate before she can get the wrong idea. The girls snicker. “Nice to meet you.”

“We actually met in 2015, but likewise,” Quinn mentions. Harrison nods once and looks away. “No hard feelings. You were, like, 18 and kind of an ass.”

“Says you. You were fourteen and a bigger ass,” Caleb rolls his eyes. “Ignore him. He’s just salty that I have friends.”

“I will hit you,” Quinn threatens.

“Do it. I’ll beat your ass,” Caleb shot back, smirking, standing taller. Harrison held his breath, looking between the two. “How’d you do on the final?”

“Fuckin’ aced it, what else?” Quinn shrugs casually, moving over so he stood on Caleb’s other side. “You?”

“Seventy eight,” Caleb tries to feel proud of such a menial accomplishment, but it’s hard. He wanted to do better. He was hoping for better.

“Hey! That’s awesome, dude!” Quinn claps him on the shoulder, beaming. “And that’s just multiple choice. You do so well on short answers, I’m sure it only goes up from there.”

“I’m not too concerned about it,” Caleb reassures, convincing absolutely nobody. “Just, don’t let Dad know.”

“You think I go out of my way to talk to your father?” Quinn scoffs. “I’d rather take a bath in radioactive acid.” Quinn smiles up at his best friend. “Are we celebrating the end of the semester or what? We are one semester closer to graduating. And you were the idiot that got on my ass about taking summer classes, so I think you owe me, since I convinced you to take them.”

“Listen, I just wanna be done with it,” Caleb shoves his best friend in return. “And I was tired from Spring semester. I need the rest of the summer off to recover.”

“You are so stupid,” Quinn rolls his eyes. “What's the plan for tonight? Bore the royals to death, make them never come to the States again?”

“We’ll do something, I swear,” Caleb insists. “I think Eleanor is crawling out of her skin, trying to get them to go bowling.”

“I am,” Eleanor nods frantically, taking another bite. “I’ll kick all of your asses.”

“And I got Diya’s permission to head out, so maybe tonight we’ll just… see the city?” Caleb offers, looking over at Harrison. “If you’re comfortable with that, of course. I know it’s a bit weird… just, going into public.”

“Please,” Harrison waves off. “It’s not a vacation if we don’t do a few things I don’t typically do.”

“Oh, Harry is becoming a rebel,” Kate gasped sarcastically. “What’s next? Gonna indulge yourself on a pint in public?”

“Piss off, Kate.”

“Ooh, feisty,” Kate smirks. “You Chapmans bring out a different side of him. I like this. He’s way more fun here.”

“Yeah?” Caleb cracks a smirk. “I think we can get into a little trouble. Break you in a little more.”

“I am not a pair of shoes,” Harrison insists.

“No, but you are stubborn as hell,” Caleb shoots back. “And I am determined to wear you down a little. Make you have some fun, and

not just go out ."

"You lot are… absolute trouble," Harrison shakes his head, unable to suppress his smile. He'd be lying if he said this wasn't already fun.

The six hung out in the bowling alley, the adults drinking casually while they watched Eleanor and Kate get overly competitive. Kate wasn't too interested in drinking, but Quinn, Caleb, and Harrison all indulge themselves with a beer or two. Caleb has never been a huge drinker. It reminds him of family Thanksgivings in Georgia turned violent. But he wanted a little fun. He wanted normalcy. Never has he had a moment that belonged to him, so… here he goes, trying to make one.

Slowly, Eleanor, Kate, and Danny convince Harrison and Quinn to join them in bowling, though Caleb remains stubborn and unmoving. He sits back on the couch, feet propped on the table, a beer bottle in his hand, half empty and dripping with condensation. He laughs at them as they pull stupid moves, and cheers them on at each strike and spare. Especially Eleanor, who has never smiled so wide, never felt so good.

Kate may be six years older, but the girls were one in the same. Perhaps Kate could be a mentor of sorts to Eleanor, giving her inspiration. And Kate desperately needed a purpose. She was clawing at the corners of her own mind in search of something to give her life meaning, and this little girl, the preteen that reminded her so much of herself… Eleanor was it.

Harrison settles onto the couch beside Caleb, whose arm was draped across the back of the couch casually. It took lots of physical restraint to not brush his hand across Harrison's shoulder, or touch his hair that just seemed so soft. He controls himself by averting his gaze to Quinn, who was now jumping and cheering at his projected win. Caleb throws his head back and laughs as Danny hits a perfect strike, putting himself a single point above Quinn.

"You motherfucker!" Quinn exclaims, melting. "Oh my god- oh my God, if I lose because of this one point I swear-" he plops down on the stool closest to the ball rack, watching Eleanor take her turn. Caleb hears the door open, glancing over the back of the couch to catch his mother's eye.

"Hey," Caleb sits up straighter, proper, arms crossed over his chest. Eyes drift toward her. Harrison and Katherine both instinctively

straighten out to look more regal. “Uh- you guys have met my mom once or twice, right? Mom, Harrison and Kate. Harrison and Kate, my Mom.”

“I hope these four haven’t been too troublesome for you two,” Mom says with a teasing smile, resting a hand on her son’s shoulder. “Can we talk?”

“Now?” Caleb shrinks slightly. She looks at him expectantly. “Later? I know what it’s about.”

“Preferably before the end of the night,” Mom negotiates. Caleb nods once, the guilt eating away at him already. “You, me, and Diya will meet in my office.”

“Yes ma’am,” Caleb nods again. Still, just the once.

“Okay. Have fun,” she leans over and kisses his cheek, waving to the rest of them before excusing herself away. Caleb sank lower, if possible, in hopes to get the attention off him. Either it works, or they can tell he’s not interested in sharing, and they leave him alone. Harrison glances at him several times throughout the rest of the night, trying to envision what any of that meant.

They end up skipping their outing in order to let the royals rest before the party tomorrow. Harrison and Kate both head to their hotel with their staff, and Quinn stalls with Caleb in the main foyer, hoping that maybe, just maybe, Caleb would clue him in on what he had to talk to Diya and his Mom about. Caleb doesn’t share.

He shuffles into the office that night, finding Mom and Diya mid conversation, papers between them, and Diya holding a binder. Caleb folds his arms across his chest, nervously bouncing on his toes.

“You wanted to talk?” Caleb asks softly. Mom strays her eyes toward her son and nods at him to sit. “I’ll stand.”

“You know why we’re talking?”

“I’m guessing it’s because of the thing with Dad?” Caleb guesses. Mom nods. “Then I’ll stand.”

“Diya and I have met with some of the legal team to see what we can do about this,” Mom tells him. He nods, avoiding eye contact. “We managed to work your father into making it more specific. Feel free to take a copy. Read it over. See if there’s any changes you want to

make."

"Are you really making me contractually obligated to be his friend? That kind of ruins the whole idea of an authentic friendship, doesn't it?" Caleb asks softly. Mom won't look at him. "Just once, can someone trust that I don't want Dad's career to come crashing down? Maybe I just-I just want to be friends with someone, and not have it be a big deal."

"It's different when it's someone like Harrison."

"Why?" He pressed. "What makes Harrison different? His popularity? What are you going to do if his family makes me sign a contract, too?"

"You don't sign it," Diya says simply.

"Then I won't sign this," Caleb sets the copy of the papers down again. "I have a friend, Mom. For the first time since Quinn and I were kids, I have made a friend. I will not ruin it with politics."

"Caleb," Mom sighs, running a hand over her face. "Would you please just look at it and decide later if-"

"No, Mom," Caleb snaps. "I'm not doing a damn contract. End of story. If Dad has such a problem with it, tell him I'll gladly pack my shit and go back to Georgia, stay out of his way and out of his campaign."

"You're being dramatic, darling. Let me just-"

"I'm going to bed," Caleb announces, turning and walking away, pulling the door shut harshly behind him.

He does not, in fact, go to bed. He instead finds himself on the floor in the map room, the White House silent. Not a damn sound in any wing, on any floor. Even the floorboards were afraid to creak. And Caleb, once again, was missing home. His bedroom at Grandma's house, the fort he made out of the bunk bed, and using flashlights so he could stay up late and read, or talk to his friends on his iPod messaging apps. The years before presidency, before the White House, and before contractual friendships that will inevitably ruin his perception of the people he once loved.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, no beta, and i barely read this chapter before posting.

That being said, I did end up posting on a Tuesday, which I didn't think I would be able to do. But I needed an outlet, and this is it :)

Im sorry if this chapter kinda sucks. I tried. The next one though,,,, oo buddy ;)

Chapter 9: An Artist's Stroke of His Paintbrush

Chapter Summary

> Danny's birthday brings positive attitudes, good times, and a breath of fresh air. It's party time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Danny’s birthday would be perfect, because he deserves nothing less.

Mom wakes everyone up early, having them all stand around the dining table at 7:00 AM, the biggest tower of pancakes Caleb has ever seen in front of his brother. Even Dad was there, smiling at his youngest son, singing the classic *happy birthday* tune whilst Danny eyes down his candles, bouncing with excitement. Moments like these remind Caleb just how young his brother is. Fifteen years old. Still ambitious and hopeful for the future, still excited by things like candles and pancakes, and eager to be celebrated in a way he never gets to be on any other day.

It’s been a while since they all got along this well, or stood this close. The last time they did, it was probably Andy’s birthday last December, because Dad was in Australia for Bridgette’s in April. All seven of them smile, and laugh, and it makes Caleb feel like they are a normal family with normal lives. Dad is not the president who is trying to make Caleb contractually obligated to a friendship, and Mom is not the First Lady, who walks a balance beam of her children's versus her husband's happiness, and all his siblings get along just fine, with little to no drama about politics or the future.

They ate a big breakfast together. Pancakes, eggs, cinnamon rolls, fruit salad, you name it. Caleb had juice while most of the others had coffee. Danny opened the gifts they got him while still at the breakfast table. Mom and Dad bought him a guitar, stunning with the woodwork and quality. Andy got him a watch, a fancy sterling silver, it must have cost hundreds. Bridgette bought him a pair of shoes, and Caleb got him tickets to a concert, an artist that Danny’s been raving about for years.

They tell stories over the fifteen years of Danny's life. Mom reminds them of the age-old story of the day he was born. Caleb was four,

turning five the following day, and he was so excited to be a big brother. Caleb helped Mom pack her hospital bags, and clung to her hip all of Mom's pregnancy, and Caleb was the first to meet Danny out of all the siblings. His birthday gift was his baby brother. Fifteen years has passed since that day, and while Caleb and Danny are far from the bestest of friends, Caleb will still admit, Danny was the best birthday gift he's ever gotten. All the material possessions in the world would never compare to the excitement of being a big brother, the fun that was throwing legos at Danny, and hiding in the closet as little kids, reading, and building fortresses in their bunk beds at Grandma and Grandpa's house. He didn't care if the kid stole his birthday. Maybe in his preteen years it angered him, but he's grown out of that.

They spend the morning together, until Dad has to go into his meetings, and Mom doesn't want to be in the same room as Caleb, and Andy gets a call, and Bridgette has somewhere to be. And then there were three, with Danny, Eleanor, and Caleb. Somehow, it always reduces down to them.

The three youngest spend the rest of the afternoon together, setting up for the party in the East Room, helping the staff inflate balloons and set up tables. Eleanor was having fun harassing some of the caterers for snacks, and Danny was milking every moment of attention that the staff was giving him. Caleb would be tired of the words *happy birthday* before his birthday even rolls in. The "kids" (if Caleb can even really call them that anymore) were having fun, though. That's the whole point of a party, right?

Eventually, Harrison and Kate show up to keep them amused, Kate trailing toward the birthday boy and Eleanor, while Harrison sits at the balloon station with Caleb. Caleb watches Eleanor tackle the princess in a hug, excitedly discussing all the music they can request to play tonight, the two coming up with a list, and of course taking some of Danny's requests, too.

"Having fun yet?" Harrison asks, propping his chin on his hand, watching Caleb press down on the helium tab to inflate a huge balloon, bigger than their heads, filled with holographic confetti.

"Oh, a blast," Caleb agrees sarcastically, glancing over his shoulder at Danny, who was laughing with Kate and Ellie again, batting around a balloon that was filled with plain oxygen. "It's fine. He deserves this."

"Yeah?" Harrison raises an eyebrow, following his gaze with a gentle smile. "You do this thing a lot… sacrificing things for your siblings.

Your time, your energy. Especially for Daniel and Eleanor." It wasn't a bad thing. Harrison knows he does it for Kate all the time, too. Show Kate that someone cares.

"Someone's gotta love those kids, right?" Caleb shrugs, taking the words straight out of Harrison's head. "They're young. I don't want them to grow up, look at their big siblings and wonder what the hell made them unlovable."

"Speaking from experience, or fear?" Harrison asks next. Caleb considers the question for a long moment.

"Both?" Caleb peers up at Harrison, attempting a small smile. He eyes Harrison's outfit, amazed by how casual he looked in denim and a plain white shirt. "Are you wearing that tonight?"

"No, no," Harrison scoffs. "Kate and I have a change of clothes with Montgomery. But it's too early for that."

"Do I get an insider detail on what *the* Prince Harrison will be wearing tonight?" Caleb teases with his newscaster voice, tying off a balloon and stretching out another one. Harrison chuckles, shaking his head. "Come on, I need some inspiration. What do you have?"

"Something stupid and easy. Button down and slacks," Harrison shrugs as Caleb manually blows up the following balloons, the smaller ones that would be scattered about the floor. "I have to wear something simple though. If I get caught in jeans, my Grandmother will probably fine me a hundred pounds."

"You're really taking this rebel shit to the next level, huh?" Caleb smirks, hitting Harrison square in the face with a mini balloon. Harrison smacks it away and glares at Caleb. "Oh goodness, what's next? Gonna get caught with a glass of wine tonight?"

"Now that is how I end up never being allowed to come to America again," Harrison says back, playing along with Caleb's dramatics.

He eyes Caleb's hands, diligent as he fills balloons, ties them off, and easily sticks a string to it. His fingers, skilled, careful, and while his hands were rough, they knew what they were doing. Harrison wonders how often he does this-- take up a regular job that could easily be done by any of the staff in the White House. Use up his own time and energy so he could say he played a part, so he can say he worked for something.

The two come up with a system, Caleb filling and tying balloons while Harrison does the strings. They laugh between themselves, hitting each other with balloons, seeing how annoying they can be before they get scolded for acting like toddlers. It's Diya who interrupts their fun, a few hours later, when it had become a rather heated game of keep off the floor with the balloon.

"Alright, people are going to start showing up in the next forty five minutes and-- none of you are dressed? My heavens-" Diya presses the heel of her palm into her forehead, taking a breath. "Eleanor, I set out a dress for you already. Daniel, no denim, no shorts, something you can take photos in. Caleb, I trust you can dress yourself?"

"Yes ma'am," Caleb cracks a small smile, nudging Harrison, who nudged him back. "Forty five minutes. You think that's enough time to do your hair, your highness?"

"Forty minutes isn't enough time to get you a new personality," Harrison quips back, making Caleb laugh. Harrison has already started to pick up on the playful banter, a social cue he never learned before becoming friends with Caleb. He only understood it because it's how he talks to his sisters, and even then, he gets scolded for being too casual. "Go get dressed before Diya kills you."

"Yes sir," Caleb does a playful salute before marching off after his siblings.

He picks out a simple outfit, but one that wasn't quite the suit and jacket that he's always stuck in at events. He sticks to some slim-cut pants, which were a nice olive green color, and a mostly cream button down short sleeve with some floral-like pattern to it, carrying similar greens as well as some yellow, white, and even some red and blue on the few birds printed on it. The shirt was half buttoned, exposing a little skin, and he sticks some converse on, tousling his hair with some gel and product in hopes to make it stick into the right position. Diya checks in on him to give the final approval, and smiles at the sight.

"Look at you, getting yourself dressed," she beams. "Only took you twenty years."

"Shut up, Caleb rolls his eyes, fixing his collar. "Harrrison and Kate find guest rooms okay?"

"They're fine," Diya reassures, watching him through the reflection of the mirror. She smooths out her plain black cocktail dress, a uniform amongst most staff that work these types of parties. "You seem really

excited about them."

"It's nice to have friends that actually like me, and not just because they like my family," Caleb murmurs back, scowling at his still messed up hair. "Help?"

She moves in, grabbing a spray bottle filled with mostly water and a tiny bit of conditioner, fixing his hair accordingly, and twirling a couple prominent waves around her finger to make them curlier.

"Handsome as ever," she pulls away, surveying him again. "Tuck in your pocket."

Caleb glances at his pants pocket. Sure enough, it somehow got turned inside out. He stuffs it back in, and finds anything he might need. Phone in his pocket. Watch on his wrist. Does he need anything else? He's just going to the East Room… He gives his bedroom a once over and determines he's good to go.

Some guests already gathered by the time Caleb goes in. He easily finds some friends from his Freshman year of college and launches into a conversation about their classes for the past two years. Caleb was exhausted already by the rapidly filling room, listening to them speak about such draining topics, but he lets it go on. He plays the part of a socialite. He feigns his smile well, thanks to years of practice, and his friends don't notice the difference. He's always done this; pretend he was happy, pretend he was having fun, and eventually sneak away to catch his breath in a space of solitude.

The room is filled to the brim within the hour. Caleb was stopped at every turn with an exclaimed *happy birthday* ! Lots of hugs, too. Lots of hugs and cheek kisses. He's not much of a touchy person. He was almost trained by his family to reject hugs, kisses, any form of physical affection from platonic or familial relationships. He just keeps the smile going.

For some reason, they had the Hadid sisters in attendance, and Danny has been hanging out with a couple of the kids from *Stranger Things* for a little while now. Quinn tails him wherever he goes, balancing his social awkwardness and getting him to enjoy his time too. Caleb is infinitely grateful, because he likely would have broken down into a fit of introverted hysterics just wanting to be alone otherwise. Quinn is one of the few people Caleb would never get tired of being around.

The music is loud, vibrating in his gut, and through the floorboard. He's sweaty from movement and being so close to so many people. He

thinks, at one point, one of the actresses from *Euphoria* was flirting with him, with gentle arm touches, batted eyelashes, sweet words, and more. If that's the case… whoops. He definitely paid her little attention. She was stunning, no doubt. She was wearing a gorgeous dress, and her makeup was done beautifully, and she had kind eyes, but Caleb wasn't interested in getting torn away from Quinn, torn away from what kept him at the party in the first place.

He just kept drifting.

Dinner is buffet-style, so he's eating as he goes, happily munching on some insane toasted ravioli as he talked to one of the senator's sons about fantasy football while Quinn split off to go find Danny. Eleanor finds him eventually, arms wound around his waist, alerting him that they would be doing the cakes soon. He takes her under his arm, reintroducing Eleanor to the guy, and uses her as a social crutch. She's just quirky enough to keep weird conversations going, just social enough to win everyone's attention in the best way possible.

Around 10:30 PM, two cakes are brought out, and Danny and Caleb stand together behind a table, an overwhelming crowd watching over them. Caleb pats his brother on the back, squeezing his shoulder.

"Happy birthday buddy," Caleb mutters quietly. Danny wraps an arm around him, too, watching Diya light the candles. Danny squeezed his older brother in a half-hug. Danny would never admit it aloud, but he appreciated all of the work Caleb does to make him feel normal, all that his brother does to make him feel like a kid. Caleb focuses on his brother to avoid his stage fright.

Don't look at the crowd. Don't look up.

It's difficult when there's an estimated two hundred people singing at you. He's holding his breath, looking anywhere but forward. Toward Diya, or Danny, maybe Quinn, or Eleanor.

Finally, he can see Harrison. Harrison, hands pressed into his pockets, smiling, rocking on his heels, watching Caleb specifically.

The song trails off, and Caleb lets Danny blow out his candles first, getting his moment of attention. He goes next, and is suddenly grateful for dim lighting and no more candles, because the cheering, the clapping, the noise, startled him. He's not a party type. He's far from a loud person in general. He tends to shy from these kinds of scenarios, and yet he somehow always gets stuck in them. He's easily overwhelmed, overstimulated, and this moment is a great example of

it.

When the room starts moving again, he decides to dip, before his anxiety gets worse, before the panic creeps up. He stops in a bathroom to relish in a moment of silence, only to discover that the music, the wandering footsteps, all of it, can be heard from the small and cramped space. The walls are thinner than Caleb recalled. Closing in on him, too.

He strides down the halls, trying to not get caught ditching his own birthday party. He jogs down the stairs and looks both ways before following the tourist-arrows to the rose garden. He gets outside, and in an instant, he's breathing full breaths again. He moved away from the door so he was out of anyone's immediate vicinity. He sinks down into the grass, careless if the grass stains his pants, or if he has a fox hunting him from the rose bushes. He sits there in the silence, as far as he can get from the party, and his eyes flutter closed, face tipped toward the sky.

Deep breath in. Hold it. And out.

"Are you doing okay?"

Caleb jumps at the sudden voice behind him, pressing a hand to his chest. Harrison frowns, carefully sitting at Caleb's side, their knees touching, and both breathing in the late summer air. Clean, and fresh, and homey.

Except... it's none of the three. Its city air, far from clean. He's still overpowered by the stench of sweat and alcohol, eliminating the word fresh. And homey? Well… this isn't Georgia. He would do just about anything to be in the quiet suburbs of Georgia, or laid in an empty field in Grandma and Grandpa's area of Florida, where no one cares who or where he is. He can just rest in silence, watching the stars and the moon circle the sky.

Harrison is still looking at him, waiting for an answer. Finally, he responds with just a simple nod, training his eyes on the sky again.

"What's wrong?" Harrison asks anyways, scanning Caleb over, almost expecting to see a physical ailment, like an aching joint, or sore back, or a headache. Some sign of something being wrong, some sign of a pain that can be treated.

"These kinds of things aren't really my type of fun," Caleb admits in a whisper. Harrison furrows his eyebrows, unsure of how to respond.

“Hence why you and Quinn are here. Because I don’t get sick of you guys. But I’m… *exhausted* by everyone else.”

“Kind of sucks to celebrate your birthday in a way you hate celebrating,” Harrison frowns.

“Not my birthday yet,” Caleb smiles sadly. “We still have…” he glances at his watch, then to Harrison again. “An hour and ten minutes. It’s still all Danny.”

“But the party will still be-“

“That’s why I’m out here,” Caleb cuts him off, deciding to lay back in the grass, arm tucked under his head. “There’s no stars. The light pollution ruins it all. But it’s almost a full moon.” Harrison directs his attention to the universe above them. Sure enough, he finds the moon, 85% there. “Full moon is the eighth, I think? You’ll just miss it here, but I’m sure you’ll get a good view in London,”

“I don’t tend to look all too often,” Harrison says back, voice softer than he intended.

“Look on the fourth. It will be gorgeous,” Caleb insists, smiling over at him. “You can still see a few stars tonight. Just not a lot.”

Harrison tilts his head all the way up, trying to adjust his eyes to see the flecks across the sky, like pin-needle pokes in space. The stars are there, but it’s rather unimpressive thanks to the city drowning out their light. What was actually beautiful about this moment was the plush grass beneath them, the way they sat so close, the cicadas on the trees, humming at them, and some frogs croaking their night songs. The crickets, and the soft breeze. It was colder than Harrison thought it would be.

Caleb, rather than searching the Universe with wonder, he’s watching Harrison. He watches his adams-apple bob, and his eyes trace along Harrison’s profile. His sharp jawline, his nose; his slightly parted lips as he tries to conjure up something to say, his eyes, looking for something beautiful.

“My Nan lives on this farm in Scotland,” Harrison says softly. “And Josie always tells me that the stars there are unlike any other. You can see them all in a blink.”

“What do you think of it?”

“I’ve never been,” Harrison murmurs back. “Only Josie has gone. Josie and my mother. But I’m determined to see it one day. I don’t… I don’t think I’ve ever seen the night sky properly. It’s always been clouded over, or polluted by city lights.”

“Never?”

“Never.” Harrison frowns. “I’m sure there’s a reason I haven't been there yet.”

“Even if it’s not a good one?” Caleb asks.

“None of the reasons why are good, Caleb,” Harrison sheds his attention back down at Caleb, his shoulders dropping, his gut swirling with anticipation. “That’s part of my title. I do things I don’t want to do. I don’t do things I want to do. I don't know why— I’m not supposed to know. I just do as told.”

“You’d think you could get anything you asked for,” Caleb hums understandingly.

“Yeah. You’d think,” Harrison agrees. “I don’t make my own decisions. There’s always someone else pulling on the strings. I just… do as told and wait for instruction.”

“Well, no one is here,” Caleb says in response. “So get comfy. Your choices are your own here.”

Harrison hesitates for a moment, considering his options. Return to the party— let Caleb take his moment alone, or perhaps hour and ten minutes alone. Or stay. Lay in the grass. Look at the dark sky and blinding moon. Think about nothing and everything, all at once. Stay at Caleb’s side… and let this moment be theirs together.

Carefully, his back rests against the ground, his hands folded over his ribs, and blindingly aware of Caleb’s leg against his.

Somehow, they pass an hour of conversation. Harrison watches the time pass on his watch. The minutes feel like seconds. The hour felt like no time at all.

Harrison sits up as they draw nearer to midnight. Caleb follows in suit, carefully getting any grass off of Harrison’s back, his hand gentle against Harrison’s body. At first, Harrison jumped, as if Caleb touched a ticklish spot. Caleb doesn't pay him any mind. Caleb swipes his hand across Harrison’s shoulders and once over his hair, freeing him from

grass or dirt. Harrison's entire body turns to mush.

Midnight was ticking ever closer. It felt like New Years Eve, the inevitable creeping up on them. Midnight shall bring a new year, marking the end of Caleb's second decade of life. Onto the third.

Out of all twenty of Caleb's years, very little of it feels like his own. Barely a moment of time has belonged to him. But this one… this moment is his, only shared with someone who also never had the opportunity to direct his own life, to choose his future. Two young men who have abided by their parents orders their entire lives, rarely ever dared to step out of line in fear of the consequence.

They sit under the moonlight, so few stars in the sky, and the air is shockingly brisk for late July. Uncharacteristically so. Or maybe Caleb was just nervous, with chills running down his spine. Their hands are close to touching as they sit leaning back on their palms. Why does physical touch sound so daunting, so dirty? Like it should be banned?

St. Johns Episcopal Church's clock tower strikes midnight. All through the city, church bells ring twelve chimes, out of sync, out of tune, bringing the start of this new year. A new year, only for Caleb. He breathes in 20, exhaling what was left of 19.

"Happy birthday," Harrison says, so quiet that Caleb barely hears him over the bells. His eyes so soft, watching Caleb decide his next move.

He owns this moment. This moment is his to decide what he wants. Here and now.

He leans forward, fingers sliding across Harrison's jaw and pathing their way to the base of his skull, cradling him close, and pulling him in. In an instant, Harrison's eyes fall closed, and he lets the rough, large hands guide him in the right direction.

Harrison hasn't kissed someone in two years. A university fling would be his last— a mistake which has haunted him endlessly. He remembers the fear he felt the moment he kissed that boy at a party, the way the boy's mouth tasted of vodka and cherry candy. He wanted to push the borderline stranger away almost the moment they came in contact back then. Curse him out for even daring to touch Harrison. Not only was he not to be in any form of relationship unless it was serious, but also, being anything other than straight was uncharted territory for royals. What would he tell his Grandmother? When his father was alive, it was his nightmare that Dad would find out about him, about his likes, and his preferences.

He doesn't feel that this time. He wasn't scared. Not of a doomed touch, or what would come of it. Not yet, at least. This moment is his, and he refuses to spend it fearing his family. Caleb's lips are softer than his hands, and his nose doesn't feel awkward against Harrison's face. His fingers were rough, calloused, dry, but his touch itself was careful. He didn't grab and grip Harrison roughly, like he was a starving animal. He didn't just mash their mouths together, teeth clashing, unable to breathe. It wasn't like he stuck them in a blender and forced them to mix. It was artistic; purposeful. Like blending a dry watercolor palette with a wet paint brush, carefully drifting the bristles across a crisp white page. He created a painting with his touch. An artist that knew and understood every stroke.

Harrison reaches one hand up, holding Caleb's hand on the back of Harrison's neck, his second finding Caleb's chest, half exposed by a somewhat-buttoned shirt. His palm, his fingers, flat against Caleb's sternum, feeling his racing heart and each breath he takes.

He should push Caleb away. He should get his distance, save them both the trouble. But Caleb doesn't taste like vodka and cherry. He tastes like watermelon bubble gum. His breath is warm. His shirt has a pleasant texture under Harrison's hand, and Caleb doesn't hold, squeeze, or pinch like everyone else does. He's careful, and sweet, and sugary. He's not a threat.

Caleb breaks the kiss first, his body alight, burning to ash in equally good and bad ways. He craves that warmth, the passion and ignition, but he doesn't want to get burned.

They are so close, their noses brush up together with every small movement. Harrison picks his gaze up, watching Caleb ponder his own actions. His long eyelashes, closed eyes, pink cheeks and pinker lips. His hands are hot. Harrison is centimeters away, lips brushing with the slightest breath. If either speak, they might as well kiss again.

"I-" Caleb breathes. "I'm sor-"

So, why speak when he can just do it?

Harrison presses a second kiss to Caleb's mouth, the initiator this time and silencing an unneeded apology. Caleb is still on fire, his skin burning wherever Harrison touches him, only relieved by Harrison's mouth on his. Harrison pulls Caleb closer, if possible, breaths mixing, a disparity in their chest, both aching to control they will never find

anywhere else. No one will tell them no, because no one has to know.

Caleb presses deeper against Harrison, hand tracing down Harrison's spine, ghosting over his ribs. Harrison held Caleb's face, thumb brushing across his cheekbone, tipping his chin upwards. He felt like his heart was running laps around their bodies, taking sharp breaths before a third, fourth, fifth kiss.

The first two minutes of Caleb's birthday is spent ringing it in with Harrison.

They break quickly at the sound of doors opening to the garden, instantly putting an extra couple feet between them before whoever it was sees their mess. Caleb tousles his hair and directs his attention up to the sky again.

"Caleb, dude, what the hell," Quinn chuckles, strolling over. "I've been trying to find you for, like, an hour."

"It got really loud. Sorry," Caleb says sheepishly. Quinn eyes Harrison hesitantly, unsure on if he should greet him or not, and wondering what the two were doing alone, what they could possibly be talking about. "We can go back in."

"Damn right we'll go back in. It's past midnight, birthday boy. That party is all yours now."

Quinn drags Caleb back inside. Caleb is unsure if Harrison follows or not. He gets caught in a tangled web of hundreds of guests, all laughing, talking, drinking with him. Several girls are touching his arm, or waist, or back, trying to see if anyone can be his birthday present. The grabby hands made him anxious, so he just drinks a little more and involves himself in bigger groups. Don't get caught alone. Don't get stuck in something you can't get out of.

Funny, seeing as, that was exactly what he was doing just a few minutes prior. Alone, absorbing every touch, getting stuck in a situation he will never quite be free from. He's unsure if it was a mistake, or the best decision he's ever made.

Chapter End Notes

> I was so excited about writing this that I wrote two drafts of it while I was in class yesterday on a physical notebook, and then wrote it a third time (this version) in my Ultimate Google Doc for this story. Would you believe me if I said this has taken up 155

pages of docs so far? Also, I'm about to go back and edit the last two chapters to correct any spelling errors, because I actually editted this chapter and realized just how crap the past couple have been.

Apparently I have a daily updating streak going. It's not intentional, I'm just hyperfocused on this story now. Feel free to leave some notes / comments / suggestions about your thoughts! I'm desperate for feedback. Happy Wednesday, y'all. Possibly another update tomorrow, depending on how much I work on this today. I do have to read an entire novel before my 2:00PM class tomorrow, so we'll see.

Chapter 10: Birthday Boy

Chapter Summary

> Adventurous afternoons and intimate evenings, Caleb just about entirely forgets his birthday, his mind more occupied with the thought of someone else.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the first fourteen birthdays in Caleb's life, Caleb would cry when people sang happy birthday to him. Maybe this was just a sign of his ADHD, being easily overstimulated and startled by the amount of attention on him, the noise, and the overall awkwardness of being at the center of a room. He didn't dislike his birthday, per say, but having a pleasant one was a rare occurrence from a very early age. He's never had the perfect birthday . Even his best birthdays were diluted in some way, like an off hand comment from his father, or a whining sibling.

The party lasted until almost 3 AM. Caleb and Harrison did not speak a single word of what happened in the rose garden after coming inside. Caleb always had someone over his shoulder, always had something else going on, and couldn't get Harrison alone. To be fair, he's not entirely sure he even wanted to get Harrison alone. He's not sure about anything right now.

He was a clusterfuck of thoughts that didn't make sense.

They let Caleb sleep in for his birthday. He was exhausted from the party, and despite waking up ridiculously early, he didn't get up and join his family until close to 10:30. He woke up close to 6:00AM as he typically does these days. Sure enough, Harrison had texted him, right on time.

Just Harrison: happy birthday! are we hanging out today or are you with your family all day?

Caleb doesn't respond. His stomach flutters with nervous excitement. What does he even say to Harrison right now?

Unlike Danny's birthday, only some of the family was there for his birthday breakfast. He's okay with that, though. It was just Mom,

Bridgette, Danny, and Eleanor. Dad and Andy had a meeting to be at. He didn't want a big breakfast— he was still full and a little nauseated from last night, so he just sits with a bagel and iced tea, laughing as Eleanor tells Mom and Bridgette all about last night's party, even if she ended up crashing close to 1AM.

"So, what's the plan for today, birthday boy?" Mom props her chin on her hand, watching Caleb finish his bagel. He ponders it for a moment. How the hell does he spend the day with Harrison after last night? How do they come back from that? "I know you have some friends in town… maybe you can take Eleanor and you guys can go do something in the city."

"Can we do the Air and Space Museum?" Eleanor asks suddenly, eyes wide, sitting forward. "Smithsonian! Let's go museum-hopping!"

"How do you have this much energy?" Caleb asks with a tired smile. "Hang on. I'll text them, see if they're interested."

Caleb pulls out his phone, starting a groupchat with Kate, Harrison, Quinn, and Eleanor, mostly to spare himself the trauma of having to text Harrison one-on-one, save himself from having to confront last night.

Hi all— trying to figure out what we're gonna do today. Anyone down to see some cool old shit?

Eleanor pulls out her phone to look at the text, and adds a message of her own, saying *PLEASE SAY YES I WANT TO GO TO A SPACE MUSEUM* .

"Are you planning on spending any time with us today?" Bridgette asks, inspecting her chipped nails with a grimace. Caleb shrugs.

"That's what yesterday was for," Caleb responds. His phone vibrates. Kate responded: *Harrison and I were wondering when you would clue us in on the plans. We'll meet you there?* He texts them back a *sure. Air and space museum @ 11:30?* "Alright. We got a plan. Ellie, get dressed, we gotta be there for 11:30."

"Yes!"

Caleb heads to his room and changes quickly into something easy. Black jeans and a tee-shirt is the first thing that comes to his mind. Eleanor, of course, puts more effort into her outfits, determined to get herself on a fashion magazine, with her light overalls, printed shirts,

funky bandana to hold her hair out of her face, and a plethora of jewelry. She can never forget the converse that matches her shirt, too. He stands in her doorway, waiting impatiently as she ties her shoes. Quinn finally texts an affirmative that he would be there.

Caleb and Eleanor get caught in traffic on the way there, so they are accidentally the last ones to show. His face is on fire seeing Quinn and Harrison talking, only able to imagine the bullshit that his best friend was saying. Especially after last night, the last thing he needs is someone to talk shit about him, even jokingly, to Harrison.

“Hey, sorry, we must’ve just hit the lunch rush,” Caleb slides up with them, acutely aware of how many PPO and secret service officers were scattered about.

“Late to your own birthday,” Quinn scoffs, elbowing him in the ribs. “Happy birthday, shit head. You really chose a museum as your adventure?”

“No, Ellie chose it,” Caleb folds his arms across his chest, avoiding eye contact with Harrison. “And I agreed. Because the Smithsonians are cool,”

“You are… so lame,” Quinn huffs, pocketting his phone. “I was actually just telling your new best friend about when we were little, and you spent four hours talking about-“

“Oh my God-“ Caleb groans, already walking toward the girls. “If it annoyed you that much, you should’ve interrupted me, or-or-“

“Why would I do that? I was seeing how long you would talk for,” Quinn smirks, following him in.

The five stop for the bag check (which is a little silly— asking the five people with the highest security teams to stop at the bag check) and any of their personal protection show their credentials and move in. Caleb accidentally bumps Harrison’s shoulder at the other side of the scanners, giving a small, shy smile.

“Sleep alright?” Harrison asks casually, looking away and stuffing his phone and wallet back in his pockets.

“Meh. Only got, like, two or so hours?” Caleb admits, running a hand over his face. “But I stayed in bed until 10:30. So I think that's a win.”

“Why didn’t you sleep?” Harrison frowns, as if he, too, wasn’t awake

at an ungodly hour for how late they left the party.

“I don’t know,” Caleb says with a sarcastic smile. “I tend to get this text, right at 6:00 AM every day. I always wake up to it.”

“Yeah?” Harrison’s cheeks flush, and he’s definitely avoiding eye contact now. “Whoever’s texting you must be an asshole, waking you up like that.”

“I don’t know,” Caleb shrugs, smirking to himself as the rest of their group join them. “It’s usually the best part of my morning.”

“You think Chris would let me hold his taser?” Eleanor asks, squirming between the two of them. “What is the museum security gonna do? Tackle me?”

“Yes,” Caleb responds, squeezing her shoulder. “Don’t be stupid. If you really wanna see the museum, don’t make them kick you out.”

“Ideally, don’t get arrested. Otherwise Kate and I cannot be seen around you,” Harrison contributes, stuffing his hands into his pockets, glancing between Eleanor, then back up at Caleb. When he realized Caleb was already looking at him, he quickly looks away. “Show us around. We don’t get to do this every day.”

“Luckily for you, I do,” Eleanor breaks out in a smile, getting a couple steps ahead, walking them forward. “Left. We’re going to look at some planes.”

Eleanor decides to be a bit of a museum-guide, making the adults laugh as she emphatically points out her favorite displays and rambles about the different sections of the museum.

They spend about two hours, letting Eleanor dump on them about her favorite subjects, before Caleb made the call that they needed lunch. The five of them squeeze into a rounded booth, where, somehow, Caleb gets squeezed between Harrison and Eleanor.

He’s blindingly aware of his every movement- the shifting in his seat, his bouncing knees, his tapping fingers. Once upon a time, that was all a major pet peeve for Harrison. His fidgeting annoyed Harrison to no end, only a short two months ago. He held his breath at every movement, waiting to be told off, waiting to be told to chill out.

That moment never comes.

Caleb orders an iced tea and a sandwich. Everyone else orders their own lunch, sitting around the round table, giggling and talking about last night.

“Yeah, no, Caleb, you totally missed it. Fucking- what’s her name? Joe King?” Quinn looks to Eleanor.

“Joey,” Eleanor confirms.

“She was absolutely hitting on the fucking *Shameless* kid. I forget his name too.”

“There’s, like, 8 *Shameless* kids, Quinn,” Caleb snickers, stirring his iced tea with his straw before picking it up and taking a careful sip.

“The one close to our age.”

“The one who plays Debbie?” Caleb rose an eyebrow.

“What? No- dude, I don’t think she’s even bi. No,” Quinn rolls his eyes. “Played, uh, Carl? Is that his name?”

“You could have described the character in so many ways and you decided on the one close to our age ?” Caleb exclaims. “That child literally went to prison on the show.”

“There’s been a lot of seasons. I forget that shit,” Quinn shot back. “Yeah— they were hitting it off. I will not be surprised if they are all over each other’s stories in a couple days.”

“I swear, you’re more into this whole celebrity drama shit than Bri,” Caleb teases, biting on his straw.

“It’s so funny when you’re on the inside,” Quinn insists. “Come on. It’s kinda cool being able to see when big names just start drifting toward each other before it hits tabloids. TMZ eats people alive and gets stories so muddy, it’s so cool knowing the real shit.”

“We desperately need to get you a girlfriend,” Eleanor scoffs.

“Seconded,” Caleb agrees, setting his drink down, pressing his palms into his thighs, finally giving in to the need to just move . His knees bounce anxiously as they wait for food and Quinn defends his lack of need for a relationship. Kate is trying to help Eleanor narrow down from the list of guests last night as to who they might set Quinn up with.

Caleb feels cold skin brush up against his. A hand, nudging the back of his. Caleb, in an effort to prove he was paying attention to Harrison, pokes Harrison's leg. Under the table, Harrison very casually rests his hand on Caleb's leg, fingers brushing over his kneecap.

After lunch, they go to another Smithsonian. Then a third. At some point, Caleb wanders off on his own to view an exhibit. The room is almost entirely empty aside from the two secret service agents that stood strategically placed within the exhibit. He crouches down to read a plaque, fingers drifting across his lips. It says something about evolution in the earliest years of mankind.

"See something interesting?" Harrison asks quietly, slowly stepping into the room and looking around in wonder.

He joins Caleb, slowly taking a knee at his side. Harrison mouths the words as he read the factoid, his lips forming unspoken syllables and nodding to himself. Caleb looks him over, but his eyes keep finding Harrison's mouth, and his heart keeps demanding that he kisses him again.

"It's… uh…" Caleb blinks a few times. "Yeah. The different types of-of-" He bites his cheek. "Yeah."

"Yeah?" Harrison hums, side eyeing him. "You wanna talk about last night?" Straight to the point. Alright.

Caleb is unsure if his heart plummets or skyrockets. He just knows its no longer in his sternum. He's scared of rejection, but he's so damn hopeful for something else. Something good. His shoulders stiffen, his hands clasped in front of him, trying to hide his nerves, his twitching.

"When we're not around people," Caleb confirms. Harrison nods, glancing at his watch then to the agents around them. "I-I just don't… don't know when that is."

"I have an idea," Harrison shrugs, patting his back before standing and walking away, leaving Caleb stunned silent, unsure of what that means, and whether or not he should be scared. His shoulder burns, and he watches Harrison leave to find the rest of their group.

Caleb rolls his shoulders back, standing upright again. He rubs the back of his neck and catches Security-Guy-Chris's eye. Chris offers a small smile and a nod. Caleb does the same in return before looking away and exiting the display room.

Eventually, they get tired of their museum tour, and decide to just wander the city. They find themselves in a park with some ice cream, sitting under the sun, baking, feeling the solitude together.

Caleb accidentally makes eye contact with Harrison a few too many times, and of course, at the most unfortunate of moments. Harrison's tongue, flat against the soft serve ice cream, or right as a good breeze blows, or when Quinn starts talking about celebrity affairs again. He makes a rule for himself to stop looking at Harrison when Harrison wasn't directly speaking. Keep himself out of trouble, even if Harrison was just perfectly eye-catching.

He sits back, palms pressed into the grass, face turned up toward the sky. The highest points of his face are warm with light, collecting the vitamin D, as if the rays of sunlight were his own personal spotlight. Perfectly comfortable in this moment, he lays his head in his sister's lap, her fingers twisting and twirling pieces of his hair. She reminds him of their mother when she does this, careful to not tug or catch her nails uncomfortably, twirling pieces of hair, either because she needs something to do with her hands, or just to show some form of affection.

His eyes close, the sun making the back of his eyelids a bright red, and his body warm. This is so comfortable, so peaceful. He doesn't remember the last time he felt this happy. It's been far too long since he last absorbed a moment like this-- calm, and slow, and nothing he has to say or do. He can just… be.

"Don't fall asleep on me," Eleanor teases, soft spoken.

"No promises," Caleb murmurs back, laughing to himself as she flicks his face. "Shithead."

"I'm not a pillow."

"Anything can be a pillow if you try hard enough," Quinn offers casually.

"A bed of nails," Caleb tells his best friend. "I dare you to go lay on one."

"How much money would you give me if I did?"

"Enough to get you a tetanus shot," Caleb scoffs.

"I'm sorry-- you have to pay for your tetanus shots?" Kate intervenes.

“American Healthcare is a nightmare, Katie. We’ve been over this,” Harrison says, teasing. “Go on. Tell her just how much that would cost.”

“I don’t just have the numbers off the top of my head,” Caleb shrugs. “Quinn?”

“Google is our friend,” Quinn murmurs to himself as he pulls out his phone and typed their question into the search engine. “I mean, we have pretty fucking good insurance because of our parents, but… the average minute clinic charges… $75? Damn.”

“Seventy five dollars?” Kate is taken aback, quickly pulling out her own phone to convert to pounds. “That’s, like, £55.”

“We have insurance,” Caleb shrugs. “Tetanus is one of the ones that all health insurances have to cover without copays.”

“But you don’t just get insurance, ” Harrison points out. “You have to have a job that provides it or pay an arm and a leg for it. In England, we just pay more on taxes-”

“Well, *you* don’t pay shit,” Caleb scoffs. “But yes. You pay taxes and it covers everyone for medical care. Yada yada yada, you can call ambulances without going into debt, whatever. Whine about it to my father.”

“You are literally the son of the president, don’t you think, yknow-” Kate starts gently.

“You think my Dad listens to me?” Caleb laughs. “I could tell my father the sky is blue and he would argue for the sake of being argumentative. You don’t just tell him what to do. ”

“That would have my blood boiling,” Harrison states.

“Why do you think I’m spending my birthday with you guys?” Caleb poses, earning a moment of quiet. “Alright. Off the topic of family. Talk about something funny again, and I’ll continue to almost fall asleep on Ellie.”

“You are… so brusque,” Harrison chuckles to himself. Caleb gave them a thumbs up, tucking an arm over his eyes.

Mom ends up having Eleanor come home by 5:30 to allow “the adults some time to hang out”. It’s been a while since Mom referred to him

as an adult-- he's not sure if his birthday made it feel real to her, or if she was still pissed about the "argument" the other day. Either way, he paid it no mind. As much as he loved Eleanor, it would be nice to not filter himself so heavily, and to not worry about what kind of impression he was putting onto his little sister.

Turns out, Eleanor wasn't the trouble.

Caleb still found himself more on edge than he would typically be when he was hanging out with friends. Any time Kate or Quinn laughed, Caleb looked to Harrison, see if he was approving of the joke. Most of the time, he was pleasantly greeted by a shining smile, annoyingly perfect.

They go out to dinner at a somewhat nice restaurant. Nothing overly fancy, still with a casual dress code, but not a diner or cafe that he and Harrison had accidentally eaten at every time they go out to eat. They are not in a small booth, or squeezed hip to hip. Caleb liked the elbow room, but he would be lying if he said he didn't miss the warmth of Harrison's thigh against his, the brushing of their knuckles, the occasional glance to his left and making accidental eye contact.

Caleb and Quinn sit beside one another, Harrison and Kate directly across from them. They order a few appetizers and snack on them for a while, trying to decide what the hell they might want to eat. Caleb is all smiles, watching Quinn make fast friends with the royals. Once again, Quinn proves himself astonishingly great at making friends. Every few moments, he had Harrison and Kate producing full belly-laughs, until Harrison was accidentally kicking Caleb under the table, sliding down in his chair. The three of them laughing together was like the most beautiful song of joy, the best melody. One he would play on repeat for the rest of his life if he had the chance. His breaths came easier, his mind dancing circles around the tune.

This is what he wanted for his birthday. Not a two-hundred person party. Not a catered event, or his parents lecturing him about childhood memories he doesn't remember. This. His friends, people he cares about, all in one space, eating decent food, snorting out laughs, unafraid if TMZ uses these photos in the morning. They were just happy. They were just them.

Caleb tries his hardest to pay for dinner, but Kate, Harrison, and Quinn all team up on him when he attempts. They take his cards and cash before the waitress can take it, and Quinn slid his own debit card into the mix, personally handing it to the waitress with the insistence

that Caleb doesn't even see the bill. Guilt eats away at Caleb's core, but he just sits and thanks his best friend quietly. Harrison ends up covering the tip, which makes him feel worse. He hates when people spend money on him, even people as wealthy as them.

They walk Quinn to his car, which was parked some place downtown. Quinn parts with a firm hug around Caleb's shoulders, and a friendly handshake with Kate and Harrison.

"You sure you don't need a ride back?" Quinn offers, hovering by his door.

"Seriously, I'm good. I'm gonna make sure they get to their hotel in one piece."

"I think that's what the PPOs are for," Quinn smirks, glancing at the royals standing a few feet away, out of ear shot, then back at Caleb. "Have fun, buddy." He sent Caleb a wink and ducks into his car, starting it up, and leaving with a wave.

Caleb's smile fades, unsure what the hell that meant, and wondering what the hell Quinn knew. His heart hammers against his sternum, falling into line with the royals, hands stuffed into his pockets to hide any tremor.

"I like him. He seems sweet," Kate says.

"He is. He's got a big heart," Caleb confirms.

"How old is he?" Kate asks, glancing at Caleb. Harrison nudged her.

"Excuse you," Harrison scowls.

"It's a question!" Kate says, raising her hands in defense. "Older than us? Younger?"

"Quinn? He's… uh, just turned 18 earlier this year."

"When?" Kate raises an eyebrow. Caleb glances at Harrison with a playful smirk.

"March."

"Dammit. I was this close to being older," she huffs. Caleb laughs. "I don't like being the youngest in the group. It's annoying."

"You're not the youngest. Eleanor is literally twelve," Harrison

reminds.

“And Danny just turned 15,” Caleb offers. She frowns.

“But we’re *the adults* as your mother put it,” she reminds Caleb. “And I’m the youngest.”

“Well, sucks,” Harrison rolls his eyes. “Get older then.”

At the hotel, Kate parts toward her room with a smiley “ bye!” and a wave, and Caleb tails after Harrison toward his room. The floor, aside from them, was empty. It’s kind of impressive, the lengths the royals go to for security. An entire floor to themselves was pretty impressive, especially given how last minute it was.

Harrison glances over his shoulder to see if Caleb was still with him. He cracks a small smile, then looks forward, checking just in case someone else is around.

“C’mon, slowpoke,” Harrison’s hand reaches out and pulls Caleb forward by the elbow. Caleb’s face heats up, and he falls into line with Harrison.

The prince scans his badge at the door and lets them in.

“Only request is no shoes on my bed. That's gross,” Harrison murmurs, already heavy with sleep now that they were in the comfort of solitude.

“I know you think lowly of Americans, but I promise, I’m not a total pig,” Caleb chuckles, copying Harrison by tucking his shoes in a corner where no one would trip on them.

“And I would believe you if I didn’t see you try to chug a beer last night,” Harrison says in response with a small smirk, walking in and tossing his jacket over a chair. “Holy shit it’s hot. Is Washington always this warm?”

“ DC is typically in the 90’s during the summer, yes,” Caleb chuckles, leaning against the wall at the entryway, afraid of getting in the way or looking too casual. “ *Washington* is usually mid seventies.”

“Why the Hell do you have two Washingtons?” Harrison puffs out a breath, popping the first two buttons of his shirt. Caleb’s breath gets caught in his throat, and he loses any sense of a comeback. Harrison glances over after the moment of silence, cracking a devious smirk.

“Cat got your tongue?”

“Hm?” Caleb’s eyes flicker back up from Harrison’s hands to his eyes. Harrison laughs, starting toward him.

“What’s got you all quiet all of a sudden?” Harrison asks, leaning against the table only a couple feet away, just outside of Caleb’s reach. Caleb considers his thoughts for another moment. “Is that all I have to do to get you to shut the hell up? Show some skin?”

“Doesn’t hurt,” Caleb murmurs back, a sheepish smile on his face. Harrison scoffs.

They are quiet for a long moment, the unspoken tension lodged between them, like magnets. Except, Caleb couldn’t tell if they were a force being pressed together or thrown apart. Opposites or likes? Caleb keeps looking Harrison over, taking in every inch of skin, from the exposed base of his throat, or the peak of his collarbone, or the top of his sternum.

Harrison takes two quick steps toward him. Caleb inhales a sharp breath, hands finding Harrison’s jaw and waist effortlessly, their lips molded together, mixing like the colors of a sunset, a beautiful palette of color. Harrison touches Caleb’s back, their torsos flat against one another’s, his fingers tracing down the bottom portion of his spine, drawing over the dimples in his back at the base. Caleb grips Harrison’s collar, thumb stroking the material, knuckles brushing Harrison’s throat. Harrison breaks for a breath, but doesn’t pull back.

“Everything okay?” Harrison asks in a whisper. Caleb nods. “Okay.”

Harrison kisses him again, very gradually getting him away from the wall, away from the entryway, into the rest of the proper room.

Caleb has been through the motions of a fling before. He’s slept with a couple different girls throughout college, and one in his senior year of high school so the virginity thing didn’t hang over his head all of college. He’s stumbled toward the bed, he’s had his shirt tugged off, he’s felt lower bellies in a teasing question of “ is this okay?” and waiting for his partner to either give him the sign that he can take off an article of their clothing, they can take it off, or they can stop there.

He’s done it before. He’s experienced. But he’s never done this side of things. The side where he was kissing a boy, and it was a boy’s hands on his body, and it was a boy’s body he would be giving affection to.

It's a little too late to be having the sexuality crisis, because he's already addicted to the taste of Harrison's tongue and the burn of his touch. He should have probably thought about this last night— the way he doesn't know a boy's body other than his own, and the fact that he's never done anything intimate with a man, and simply the idea that he hadn't even considered being somewhere on the LGBTQ+ spectrum until Harrison stepped in. Until the most beautiful person alive laid eyes on him. Touched him. Spoke to him. Made him feel seen.

"I've never really," Caleb's breath hitches at a nip to his shoulder, one hand tangled in Harrison's hair. "Done this."

"If you're uncomfortable, I don't mind stopping," Harrison reassures in a whisper. Caleb nods rapidly. "Tell me if you need to-"

"Don't stop, fucking kiss me," Caleb grumbles, catching Harrison's mouth again.

He's not sure when their clothes became a heap on the floor. Maybe that's a good thing, with the nerves built in his gut. He wouldn't say it was butterflies in his stomach. He would more so compare it to the fear you would feel when you're looking a monarch in the eyes and wondering how the fuck you're supposed to please him, because you just want to be praised, you just want to do good.

Turns out, it's really easy.

It's just soft touches and murmured words of affection into one another's skin. Maybe Harrison was nervous too, or maybe he didn't want to overwhelm Caleb on his first time having any kind of sexual intimacy with another man. Either way, it was Godlike.

Caleb is unsure when Harrison's hand stopped feeling like fire and started feeling like energy, like electricity, but he knows that he prefers it this way. And he's not sure when Harrison's attitude became sultry confidence, but he won't complain.

It felt a little goofy at first. It reminded Caleb a lot of when he first lost his virginity. The slow, methodical touches, hesitant to push forward just in case. When they were finally undressed, the sudden realization of what would happen. When they kissed, feeling like he never wanted it to end. Touching his legs for the first time and just wanting to squeeze and pinch and kiss every inch of skin. It was his first in a long list of many.

Even after they've both finished and gotten sleepier than their bodies could handle, they still clung together. Harrison's fingers draw through Caleb's hair, soft kisses to interrupt their breaths every few minutes. Arms around one another, legs tangled up. They're sweaty, and a little gross, but Caleb couldn't imagine going to bed alone after this.

"Did you have an okay birthday?" Harrison murmurs into his neck, sleepy, and unwilling to move. Caleb nods, hugging Harrison's body closer, if possible.

"One of the best," Caleb agrees in a whisper, cracking a smile as Harrison blows cool air on his shoulder, over a small hickey that will be easily hidden under clothing. His eyes flutter closed, trying his damned hardest to not fall asleep on Harrison. "I really have to shower. I'm sorry I'm gross."

"I have one hell of a shower here," Harrison chuckles, voice raspy with exhaustion. Caleb runs a hand over his face, unsure. "At the bare minimum, I'm going to shower. Don't leave, I don't trust that you've slept enough to drive home."

"You sound like my mother," Caleb jokes, letting Harrison up.

"Your mother must be a smart woman," Harrison nods simply. "If you're up for it, come with me. If not, you can take one after,"

"Give me a sec," Caleb puffs out a breath. Harrison nods before going in.

Caleb doesn't end up joining him, just to give himself a moment alone. A moment to think. His sleep deprived mind wanders wildly, and he is unsure what any of it means. He's not sure what being "gay" entails, but kissing other dudes is probably on the list of things to do when you're gay. Other things on that list probably include looking at another man's hands and imagining their talents, or soaking up his words.

The follow up question would follow more of the sex topic. What the hell even qualifies as sex? Anything that's deemed it between consenting people? Or does there have to be some form of something more? At what point does it go from intimate to sex ? Is there a line? Has he crossed it?

Caleb finally gets up, knowing he might fall asleep if he didn't. Harrison is just getting out of the shower as Caleb goes in. He mostly

just washes the sweat off, and when he gets out, he rakes a hand through his hair in a half attempt to finger-comb it.

“Stay for tonight?” Harrison offers quietly. “We can grab breakfast in the morning. Pick up on the day quickly.”

“I don’t wanna get in your way-“ Caleb frowns.

“It’s no pressure,” Harrison reassures, carefully tussling some product through his hair. “But I would enjoy having you around, if you choose to stay.”

Caleb bites down on his cheek, arms crossed over his chest and surveying Harrison in his post-shower routine. He somehow looks equally as regal, stripped down to nothing but briefs, a small nip on his shoulder, as he does at any event, dressed in a suit and tie, trained to smile and please others. He’s stunning.

“If I stay, will you still text me in the morning?” Caleb asks softly. Harrison breaks out into an unstoppable grin, looking through the mirror to make eye contact.

“I’m fairly sure I still sent my 5:00PM text even though we were together,” Harrison shrugs with a smile. Caleb furrows his eyebrows. He hasn’t looked at his phone in a while. “Yes. I’ll still send my morning text.”

His face is warm, and he feels silly, but he agrees to stay after that.

There’s something on the TV— Caleb isn’t entirely sure, he wasn’t paying attention, and they were both in Harrison’s bed. Harrison shrunk down to fit against Caleb’s body, leaning into his chest and fumbling their hands together. Harrison drags his smooth fingers up Caleb’s arm then down again, soothing, and matching their breathing.

They lay down, a thin sheet over them, Harrison’s back to Caleb’s chest, his hand still smoothing over as much of Caleb’s arm as he can. Caleb ends up falling asleep first, lost in the comfort he wouldn’t find anywhere else, feeling his safest right here. Harrison, like a child’s beloved toy, tucked under Caleb’s arm.

Harrison’s heart raced at this prospect— being in bed with the son of the president. It’s beyond dangerous, beyond stupid. But Caleb’s arms were comfortable, a weight on his body that he didn’t realize he needed until it was there. Even in his sleep, Caleb’s touch was gentle, his thumb ghosting across a patch of skin on Harrison’s abdomen.

It's daunting to think just how much he was risking for this. It's not like his title is a job, or something he can easily give up. It's heavy, resting in his shoulders no matter where he is, or who he's with. He is just as much the prince when he is in public at a gala as he is when he's in bed with a very attractive person as he is when he is alone taking a shower. His title never leaves him. He does not sleep and become an every day person, and he doesn't get to make mistakes on such a grand scale. If anyone found out, they might as well be done for.

Not a moment of time has been his own before. But this weekend has been entirely theirs. He doesn't want to give that up.

Chapter End Notes

> okay i am really not a fan of writing anything smutty/ nsfw, so i tried my best without getting TOO explicit. I'm an entire twenty year old university student but i think sex scenes can be REALLY awkward to write, and i prefer more dubious references to sex and small details rather than unambiguous writing. So… this will be a bit of a challenge. If you know anything about RWRB, you know it's a bit *ahem* ~steamy ~
>
> Also, almost 1K hits… that's kinda cool. I was somewhat big on wattpad during its prime, but now wattpad is a sell out, so im working on building my credentials over here instead. so, thank you :) happy Friday yall! Enjoy todays sad-ist animatic !

Chapter 11: Pretty

Chapter Summary

> Its Harrison and Kate's last day in America before they have to fly back home. Caleb and Harrison formed attachments quick, and it's going to be weird to say goodbye.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harrison is equally as beautiful in sleep as he is awake.

Caleb woke twice throughout the night. He's not sure what it was that startled him awake and had his body desperate to get up and go. But both times, he took it as a chance to ponder and watch Harrison sleep.

Harrison was curled up on his side, one arm hugged against his chest, the other tucked under his head. His shoulder blades and spine poked out like little mountain peaks. They seem sharp to the touch, like they may slice Caleb's finger open if he tried. Really, though, his skin is soft, and Harrison moves toward Caleb's hands instinctively. Harrison's breaths are quiet, and occasionally he'll roll his shoulders or move his head, but he's otherwise fairly still.

He doesn't sleep well, but he sleeps better than he typically does. He gets longer periods of sleep before his restlessness and nightmares wake him.

The third time Caleb wakes, it's with the soft vibrate of his phone at 6:00 AM. He doesn't look at the text, knowing damn well he'll probably want these texts later, when he has to separate from Harrison for an unknown period of time. He runs a hand over his face, rubbing his eyes. He can smell the nutty, smoky scent of coffee. He turns over, wanting to hide his face in Harrison's back. The bed is empty beside him.

"You move a lot in your sleep," Harrison murmurs quietly from the desk where he sat curled up in the chair, reading from his book, sipping down his coffee. He looks cute, still not dressed, but wearing a plain hoodie to keep his torso warm. He either didn't think about sweatpants, or he just didn't care. Caleb was a little distracted last night and never paid Harrison's legs much attention before this

moment. He's thin, but what weight he does have is relatively muscular. It's fascinating.

"Sorry," Caleb mumbles back, puffing out a breath.

"Don't be. Just an observation," Harrison flips the page. "It's a sign of a lacking sleep schedule, over-using your phone, or just general anxiety."

"Three strikes, I'm out," Caleb half jokes with his barely-audible grumble. Harrison would be lying if he said he didn't feel some type of way about Caleb's morning voice, sultry and warm, like a mildly humid summer morning. Like a hazy sunrise. "You're kind of like a walking textbook, you know that?"

"Me?" Harrison scoffs. "We were on the phone the other day and you just… knew the capital of Montenegro."

"Ulcinj is not the capital of Montenegro," Caleb laughs. "The capital is Podgorica."'

"My point exactly," Harrison gestures, smiling to himself.

"Fair," Caleb cracks a tired grin up at the ceiling. "We're… tragically boring people, aren't we?"

"Very much so, yes," Harrison agrees. "You want coffee? Or would you rather head home?"

"Rather die," Caleb hums in response.

"I can hook that up for you."

"With your family? Wouldn't put it past you," Caleb said with a sleepy smile. "But I will take that coffee."

"Do you actually believe those conspiracies?" Harrison asks incredulously as he stands and pads over to the Keurig. His legs are long and slender, and when he stands on his toes to reach the K-Cup in the cupboard, Caleb can make out his hip bones just above the waistband of his briefs "You realize it's all a hoax, right? My grandmother did not put a hit out on my Dad's ex wife."

"Just like you didn't sleep with the son of the President of the United States," Caleb shrugs, pushing himself upright and finding his shirt. He pulls it on and lolls his head around his shoulders, earning

gruesome cracks from his neck. He twists and pulls on his joints until his spine and shoulders also provide satisfying pops . Harrison grimaces watching him play “chiropractor” on his own body.

“As far as anyone knows, no, I didn’t,” Harrison agrees, sipping his coffee. “What kind of coffee? Light, medium, dark?”

“Dark, please.” Caleb slides to the edge of the bed. “Like my soul.”

“You are so annoying,” Harrison huffs. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“I can stop at a Starbucks if I’m hungry.”

“And I am only in the United States for the remainder of today. What would you like for breakfast? I ask that you give me a good answer before my sister decides to join us and ask about what we did last night. Consider it a chance to come up with a good cover.”

“You are such a spy,” Caleb scoffs, smiling. Harrison sits back down and holds his mug to his chest, watching Caleb get dressed with his lips tugged upwards. His eyes linger on Caleb’s hips and butt as he buttons his jeans again, and his gaze trails up his arms, studying the dip and curve of each joint, muscle, and bone. “See something interesting?”

“Come here,” Harrison requests softly. Caleb rolls his eyes. “Please?” *Shit. He’s seductive.*

Caleb held his breath, weighing his options. Give into the gentleness of his tone, let this set him up to be bossed around, or do as he pleases, letting Harrison beg a little more… He could test the water, see where it flows.

“Caleb?” He whines lightly.

Dammit.

He moves toward Harrison, who sets his coffee and book aside, holding out his hand so he could touch Caleb’s hand. Caleb, far from the touchiest of people, lets him, their fingers sliding together, weaving together beautifully. Harrison carefully pulls him down within his reach, pressing his lips to Caleb’s cheek. Caleb bites the corner of his mouth to hide the smile. He could melt at the feeling of Harrison’s mouth anywhere on him.

“What are the chances of you coming back to America soon?” Caleb whispers, eyes falling closed at the feeling of Harrison’s head perfectly puzzle-piecing into his neck.

“Anythings possible,” Harrison murmurs, another soft kiss to the underside of Caleb’s jaw. “What are the odds that I can get you to come to England?”

“Pretty fucking good,” Caleb inhales sharply. “You are making me regret getting dressed.”

“Is it really that much effort to get undressed again?” Harrison questions, pulling back and a cocky smile on his face at the sight of Caleb already squirmy and desperate for Harrison to just touch him again. “Hm?”

“I feel like I’m being played right now,” Caleb murmurs as Harrison releases his hand in exchange for trickling his fingers over Caleb’s waistband of his jeans. Caleb squeezes Harrison’s arm.

“Ah, gentle,” Harrison tsks. “It’d be a shame if damage came to a prince.” Caleb takes a sharp breath as Harrison’s thumb traces over his hip bone. “Yes or no?”

“You are the absolute worst,” Caleb puffs out a breath, lifting his eyes to the ceiling. Harrison still waits. “Yes, Harry. Yes. Stop being a bitch.”

“Aye aye,” Harrison chuckles, standing and resting his hands on Caleb’s waist, pressing their lips together.

Caleb thinks he would be perfectly content if Harrison never left his side, never left this exact position. Hands on Caleb’s hips, lips against Caleb’s, his entire body focused on Caleb. Gently, they turn, Caleb sinking into the chair Harrison was just in. Caleb’s heart raced, energized and excited, gently gripping one of Harrison’s thighs.

Caleb thought Harrison couldn’t get much prettier than he just was, sat with the sunlight pooling across his face, hair still fluffed and messy from a good night's rest, legs pulled up onto the chair with him as he read some novel that Caleb had no interest in. Caleb was not prepared for what Harrison would look like on his knees, the light now directly in his eyes, the warm brown reminding Caleb of beautiful summers evenings at the lake, half awake on the hammock and the sound of frogs croaking lulling him to comfort. His long eyelashes, too. Caleb is holding his breath because dammit Harrison is

gorgeous.

“You are… so pretty,” Caleb murmurs softly. Harrison’s face goes pink, and he hides the redness by pressing a kiss to the inside of Caleb’s thigh. Caleb bites his knuckle, taking a sharp breath. The things this man does to Caleb’s mind…

Caleb would have absolutely returned the favor if Kate didn’t start calling Harrison a few minutes later. They missed the first call, Harrison too “busy” to hear the vibrations. Then they missed the second time she called, because Harrison was thriving at the relentless compliments Caleb pressed into his skin, Caleb insisting quiet murmurs of just how beautiful, sweet, good, Harrison was.

Out of all these compliments, for some reason, the simple usage of *good* is what got him. Harrison felt the need to prove just how good he is, how good he can be. Even after he finished, Caleb did not relax on his compliments, gently cradling Harrison’s face, whispering quiet affection into his cheeks and mouth. Harrison couldn’t care less if Caleb didn’t have time to “return the favor”. It’s been a while since he felt this cared-for. Soft hands, warm lips, quiet thank you’ s and praises for doing so good.

The two get ready in the bathroom after Harrison spoke briefly with his sister on the phone. Harrison watches Caleb obsessively “fix” his hair, trying to style it purposefully messy, but unable to get the right shape. Harrison does his how he always does it, combing it out of his eyes and into a pristine shape.

“You’re staring,” Harrison murmurs.

“And?” Caleb leans into the counter, hands stuffed into his pocket. His eyes travel over Harrison’s body curiously. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Look pretty no matter what you’re doing?” Caleb hums. Harrison felt his face flush again. “It’s incredibly difficult to do anything productive when I just want to sit here and look at you. No matter what you’re doing, you’re always just… pretty.”

“Pretty?” Harrison repeats. Caleb gives one small nod. “Are you sure you’re not straight?”

“Shut up,” Caleb rolls his eyes. “You are pretty. You’re just…

classically, really pretty. No matter what timeline I'm in, you are traditionally attractive."

"Well, thank you," Harrison finally gave in, smiling softly.

His smile reminds Caleb of a spring day, when the flowers begin to bloom, and the air gets a little warmer. Caleb can just envision himself laid in the grass, reaching to touch the clouds an entire world away, the scent of lawn clippings and budding daisies making him feel safe, and at home.

Caleb finds himself wondering how it's possible that he just keeps comparing Harrison to all the seasons at once, how Harrison manages to be every season's beauty, wrapped into one person. Harrison is equally a summer evening in the hammock as he is the spring afternoons spent cloud gazing. Similarly, he is the smell of fall, and the crunch of dry leaves, and the taste of hot cocoa in cold Octobers. He is the crisp, untouched powdery snow, fluttering through the sky like frozen butterflies in the winter. How is it possible for one person to be it all in one? How is it possible for one person to be so close to perfect?

"What are we telling our sisters?" Caleb finally asks after a long pause. He needs to not fall so madly, deeply in love with a person he barely knows. Especially with a person like Harrison.

"Easy. You stayed the night," Harrison shrugs, turning to face him. Caleb hesitates. "You need detail?"

"My sister is 12. She will ask a million questions, and she will likely report back to my mother. Yes, I need detail," Caleb huffs.

"Fine," Harrison sighs, hand resting on Caleb's waist, chewing on his lip as he thinks of an excuse. Harrison inches closer. "We had a couple beers and… watched the new spin-off of the Fast and Furious movies."

"Did we like it?" Caleb asks, mostly because he likes having Harrison this close. He has to physically restrain himself from playing with Harrison's hair, just to see it all messy again. Harrison cracks a small smile.

"Not at all. Even drunk, it was a stupid movie," Harrison hums. Caleb nods to himself. "You slept on the couch. We both fell asleep before the movie ended, and we were too drunk to remember much about it. Just that it was awful."

“Smart,” Caleb nods.

“I have my moments,” Harrison confirms.

Caleb’s body is warm with the lie of liquor, his lips tasting like imaginary alcohol. Hell, if he really clung to that lie, maybe that would excuse what actually happened last night… He was drunk. He was so drunk that he just… slept with a prince. And then the following morning had such a major hangover that he got a blowjob from him, too.

They’re close, though. Harrison is holding Caleb within inches of his body, and Caleb is enjoying the sight of Harrison right there, right within reach. It won’t be like this tomorrow. What will come with the prospect of tomorrow, of the future where they are not side by side?

Caleb wants to kiss him again. Just because he could. Harrison smiles as Caleb leans down, a hand gently holding Caleb’s jaw as he dips lower. Centimeters away, Caleb could practically feel Harrison’s smile.

There’s a knock on Harrison’s door. Harrison snickers, leaning up to leave a gentle kiss to Caleb’s cheek before walking away to let their sisters in. Caleb follows him out, sitting casually at the couch, lacing up his converse to let them leave and get breakfast, get them out of this hotel room before they get trapped in too much trouble.

“Good morning, losers,” Eleanor greets, striding straight toward Caleb in order to smack his shoulder.

“Ow! What the hell?”

“You didn’t come home last night, idiot,” she frowns. “We were waiting on you.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Danny and I,” she shrugs, plopping down. “What did you do?”

And thus the questioning began. Harrison watches with a small smile as Caleb answers all ten thousand of his little sister’s questions, amusing her curiosity and quizzing. She continues to try and catch him in a lie, but he must have thought up just about every possible answer in the minute and a half between their planning and her arrival.

When she seemed satisfied with his response, the four set off for breakfast. No one was entirely hungry, so as Caleb had suggested in the solitude of the hotel room before their sisters joined them, they set off for Starbucks. Eleanor bounces on her toes, pulling on his wrist and pleads for a caffeinated drink, begging and begging and begging until her brother gave in. He would do anything if it shut her up for even two minutes. To make up for yesterday, he covers everyone's order, which visibly annoys Harrison. Payback's a bitch.

They don't really have a plan for today other than be together, hang out with each other, and have fun. For the first part of the morning, they sit in the national mall at the reflecting pool, collecting sun rays and talking softly about what comes next for each of them. Caleb found himself more than interested in Harrison's quiet droning and groaning about galas and charity events that he didn't want to attend. He wonders how many of these events he was invited to, too.

Around noon, they circle back to the White House and spend the afternoon in the game room. The four of them play a couple games of pool, trying their hardest to teach Harrison and Kate how to properly play, though both of them failed miserably .

"We'll get you some practice on iMessage," Caleb reassures, clapping Harrison on the shoulder before taking his cue and leaning over slightly in an attempt to line up the cue ball with a blue striped billiard. He shoots, and smiles watching it effortlessly sink into a corner pocket.

Harrison glances from Caleb's hands to his face, unsure which was more attractive in that moment… His concentration was something Harrison couldn't help but melt at the sight of, the way his eyes glaze over with focus, and his breathing shallows, and he suddenly loses what Harrison was starting to believe to be a chronic tremor. Harrison takes the cue back and makes half an attempt at firing, but part of him loses interest in winning. He was more curious to see how Caleb would react to winning a game. Would he maintain that cocky, know-it-all attitude? Or is he a good sport, and a gentle winner?

Harrison would have been an idiot to think Caleb would be anything but a show-off.

He's a sweet kid, really. He has a beautiful smile and contagious laugh and an energy unlike any other, but he is, at his core, painfully American , celebrating his win at every available opportunity, gloating, begging to play again just to inflate his ego more. Harrison is

unsure if he let him have the win or not… To be honest, he was almost as attracted to Caleb being a cocky asshole as he was to Caleb snuggled up against his spine. The multiple facets of that singular person are equally fascinating and beautiful.

The four soak up every minute together. Lunch is brought to them, because they were so busy having fun that they forgot to eat. They watch a movie (decidedly not *Hobbs and Shaw* , after the false horrific review Caleb and Harrison gave it), Kate and Eleanor bowl a couple rounds with Danny, and they just keep circling and doing things until time starts to run out. Eleanor steals Kate away to go hang out with Diya in the library, leaving Harrison and Caleb to wander on their own.

They almost didn't like the solitude. As nice as it was to spend time with one another before Harrison had to return home, they were unsure if they liked it or not. It would be different if they were at Harrison's hotel room, alone, where they could speak any words they desired, they could brush up against one another without fear of being seen, they could make eye contact without worrying if anyone saw just how they looked at one another… The White House was not private, secluded, or comfortable. It was riddled with rat-like staff, all of which have signed an NDA in terms of family arrangements publicized to the media, but that means nothing in terms of what they can or can't tell Caleb's father.

When they ran out of things to do, Caleb showed Harrison his room. He plops down at his desk chair by the open window, his head thrown back, eyes fallen closed.

Harrison carefully shuts the door behind him and surveys the space. It is equally as historical-looking as the castles. The walls are beautiful, and the bed frame stunning, sure. But none of it was Caleb's style. None of it was his interior design. Harrison wonders how he sleeps at night, but then recalls last night's rest, or… lack thereof. Caleb doesn't sleep. He stirs, and wakes, and falls back asleep, and the cycle repeats.

"So this is where I hide when you call me, or I call you," Caleb introduces with a tired smile, picking his head up again. "And out this window, there are fireworks every other night."

"Sounds stressful," Harrison frowns. Caleb shrugs casually, as if Harrison didn't see him have a panic attack in a supply closet only a few weeks prior. "I can't see you living here."

“Funny. Me neither,” Caleb says with an attempt at a smile. “I’m sure you have your summer estates or whatever?” Harrison nods. “And surely it’s more so directed toward your taste, not what the interior decorators and everyone puts together for you?” Another nod. “That’s what Georgia is like for me. It’s all my design. Those bedrooms were mine, down to the floorboards.”

“How often do you visit?”

“I don’t,” Caleb’s smile falters. “I… I haven’t been in Georgia since Christmas of 2016. Ever since then, my family comes up here for the holidays. Why cram us into a family home when you have the entire capital?”

“Because the capital doesn’t feel like the place where you should have your holidays… The capital is your job, not your life.”

“They’re one in the same, aren’t they?” Caleb poses. Harrison bites his cheek unsure of what he wanted to say in response. What could he possibly say to that? He’s not wrong. “Come here for a second?”

Harrison doesn’t have to be asked twice. He does as requested, taking Caleb’s outstretched hand and letting Caleb pull him closer. The closest they will get to solitude for who knows how long… the closest they will be until the next time they can be alone…

“I’ll get you on some guest lists, if you’re not on them already,” Harrison mumbles into Caleb’s hair, hugging him to his torso. “I’m sure you were invited to the gala in Sweden…”

“I think so,” Caleb confirms, pulling back and looking up at Harrison with sparkling eyes and a sad smile. “I don’t know if my Dad will let me go. We’re currently fighting, actually. But I’ll… I’ll do what I gotta do.”

“Play nice, keep a low profile,” Harrison murmurs, sliding a thumb along Caleb’s jaw. “I think we’ve done a really good job, getting the press to believe we’re best friends…”

“Are we not?” Caleb pouts out his lower lip teasingly. “I thought we were getting close.”

“Oh, of course,” Harrison rolls his eyes with a soft smile. “And I’m sure you sleep with all your best friends, right?”

“Just the pretty ones.”

“I’ll tell Quinn you said that,” Harrison threatens.

“Go for it. He knows he’s pretty,” Caleb lies to earn a reaction out of Harrison. It works. He laughs, pulling Harrison closer again. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding. C’mere. I’m sorry. Come here.”

“You better watch yourself, Chapman,” Harrison murmurs as Caleb pulls him down for a kiss. “I know the shit you like. I can hold that against you.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Harrison and Kate left that night for the hotel, scheduled to fly home early the next morning. Caleb hides his heart well. He doesn’t tell anyone, not even Harrison, that he didn’t want Harrison to leave, that he was unsure how he would be able to handle any of his life alone. He didn’t risk exposing any pressure points to anyone— not his family, friends, or Harrison alike.

Instead, after Harrison and Kate left, Caleb decidedly marched his way to the west wing. He passes plenty of staff on his way, a series of whom are sure to pass along the message through personal headsets that Caleb was pursuing his father’s office.

Play it nice. Lay low.

Caleb knocks on the office doors and waits patiently. It’s Mom that opens the door, raising her eyebrows at her son. Her eyes were wider, her smile pleasant. She was surprised to see her son. Or maybe she forgot he was her son at all before this moment. He crosses his arms across his chest.

“You want me to sign the contract or not?”

Anything to get Dad’s approval. Anything to be granted access to Harrison.

If this is what it takes, so be it. No one has to know why he cracked. No one has to know what led him to this conclusion. All that matters is, he will be going to Sweden for the gala, and his father didn’t look ashamed to call Caleb his son. A piece of him dies, signing a contract he can only see ending in flames, but to compensate for that pain is the ignited embers of life, of need, and excitement, finally burning for the first time in too long.

He’s not sure what the future holds, but he’s excited for it.

Chapter End Notes

so, uh, this chapter kinda sucked, but we’re getting into some of the good stuff, so i will make it up to you eventually. i am running on, like, 0 sleep but I was determined to update a chapter today. So here. Enjoy. Please.

Im going to try and breakdown these family dynamics a lil more i think in the next chapter or two, so stay tuned ;) i appreciate the support these past few chapters. V appreciated. This project is very much a “distract me from the stresses of university” so having even just one person read / review this garbage means a lot.

have a good week, pals.

Chapter 12: The Monsters in His Closet

Chapter Summary

She knows...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Life carries on, whether the Chapman children were at the royals' side or not. It's a brutal realization, knowing that Caleb not only can survive without the comfort of someone he likes so much, but that he *has to* survive without him. They can't be together at all times, no matter how much both of them wanted it. For the safety of their secrecy, distance was crucial.

Harrison finds himself hiding in the library in an effort to think all it through, think about the next steps. Old, dusty books have always been a rather comforting scent, and the sound of crisp pages flipping is like a song that no instrument could replicate. He's curled up in a chair by the window, a book in his lap. Every few minutes he turns the page, but he has not read a single word of the text. His mind is elsewhere.

He can still feel the rough hands on his skin. Somehow, despite the texture, Caleb was so incredibly gentle with them. His fingers drag slowly, gently, trickling across bare skin and following it with a careful kiss. Harrison hasn't slept very much since the trip, either. He misses the pressure of someone pressed against his back, of the ticklish breath and late night stirring. Even if he didn't sleep well with Caleb next to him, he slept even worse without him.

He's not supposed to feel like this though. These are not things he's allowed to feel, see, do. If anyone, including even the safest people, like Kate or Eleanor, found out what they were doing, their lives were over. Kate and Eleanor might keep a secret from the press, but they can't keep their mouths shut forever.

And what comes of the future? What comes when Gran starts harassing Harrison about finding a wife, having children, continuing the lineage of royalty? Maybe his sisters were just as capable of children, but he was the only remaining male, and that intrinsic sexism is impossible to get rid of.

Will he have to find a woman to marry, have children with, do all of the public affairs with? Will he do all that and still have his heart heavy, and still be texting his “best friend” at 6 AM and 5 PM Eastern Standard Time? Will he be caught in the lie of a marriage and exposed to the public? Or will he just not get married, and have the media sneak around until they out him themselves, yanking him from the closet, like picking at an unhealed scab.

It’s a losing game, no matter where he turns. No matter what route he takes, he will not be happy. He cannot just be with Caleb. Just like Caleb can’t just be with Harrison. Their countries would eat them alive, accuse them of espionage, and insist they were trading secrets. The homophobia would be relentless. No one would come away unscathed.

He realizes in this moment, flipping to page 97 of a book he hasn’t read a word of, that he was becoming his father. Cold. Reluctant. Eyes on a person he would never be given the blessing to be with, never have a family with. Forced into a lifestyle he will never want. A wife. He wonders if someone would set him up… he can only imagine how he would fake it. Simple compliments. Fake smiles. Placate her feelings when she is upset about feeling unworthy, and just play the right cards until the game is over.

He is on track to die a miserable man.

His phone buzzes with a text from Caleb, though, and it suddenly doesn’t feel so sore anymore.

Caleb had to be on his best behavior.

He keeps a pleasant smile on his face. He lets his father puppeteer his life however he choses. He is sure to be the perfect son that Andy made himself be when he was Caleb’s age. Caleb sits in on meetings to get an idea of the political climate. He keeps his mouth shut to prevent from speaking out of turn, to keep himself from revealing his own personal distaste for republicans.

Harrison and Caleb continue to put up their PR friendship. It’s funny to them— they find themselves laughing hysterically around 7PM EST, reading through the threads of tweets about them. Caleb posts photos of them, or with Kate, with goofy captions and colorful language. Harrison’s PR team posts photos of the two of them hanging out from the few days he was in America with dictionary-esque captions and photo descriptions. People comment on them, and the

media eats it alive. Within hours of any photos going public, the media was having a festival, writing about the budding best friends.

Caleb sits upright in the chair across from his father's desk as Dad reads the invitation for a third time. Caleb clasps his hands together tight in front of him.

"I never took you for an international events type politician," Dad says finally, looking up at Caleb above his glasses. Caleb cracks a small smile. "Why?"

"Becoming friends with Harrison has improved your ratings significantly. Maybe attending more events on a global scale will do the same," Caleb responds, sure to make proper eye contact, not let himself slouch, or squirm. Don't give Dad any reason to say 'no', say he 'wasn't ready'. "And, in all honesty? Harrison is going, and it's a reasonable excuse to see a friend without just taking an unnecessary trip."

"You and Prince Harrison really got close," Dad smiles, then looks down at the invite again. "I appreciate your honesty, and I really appreciate your consideration of our funds. I'm impressed."

"Thank you."

He wasn't lying about any of it, but Caleb felt like he was. His throat felt tight. His palms were clammy. He wanted to squirm, to fill the silence. He doesn't. It's been so long since his father smiled at him like that, since Dad looked impressed or proud of his middle child. His truths were just closet doors, hiding the mess inside, and he felt guilty for saying them. Dad seemed happy to say he had three sons again, and Caleb didn't want that to change.

"Okay," Dad says decidedly. "You have my blessing. Thank you for asking me first."

"Of course," Caleb nods once, trying to not get too giddy, too excited.

"Next time, feel free to raise these with Diya. So long as you are being responsible and abiding by the contract, and she thinks it's a good idea, I don't mind."

"Thank you, Dad."

"You're welcome," he says, passing the invitation back. "I want to see lots of press coverage on this. Make the Chapman name out to be one

of the Gods."

"Yes sir," Caleb nods with an excited smile before leaving. He whips out his phone and considers texting Harrison, considers getting excited, and laughing, and playing off one another's energy.

He doesn't.

He wants to sit in this happiness for a moment.

He wants to feel his father's pride, and feel his trust. He wants to be excited to travel without his parents, to be independent, and a person of his own. He doesn't need his last name to be some kind of success, and he doesn't need fame to be a success, either. He just needs to be happy.

Nothing is clear about his future. Nothing makes sense. But he is at least happy that it's there. For once, he does not dread tomorrow, or the day after. He is excited to see what new adventure it brings.

That night, Harrison calls at the time he always does, midnight for him, 7PM for Caleb. Caleb always loved these calls, the way Harrison's voice rasped on with heavy exhaustion that he was fighting desperately in an attempt to stay up, to stay awake and spend time with Caleb. He would speak, droning on, and on, and on to fill the silence and keep him from falling asleep, but eventually, Harrison would stop making sense and they would just laugh. They would giggle and Harrison would murmur something like *I'm so sleepy* .

Harrison stays awake as Caleb speaks about his day, and talks about how he thinks his father is starting to trust him more. He decides against telling Harrison that he received permission to go to the gala. He didn't want to wake him too much, energize him. And, part of him almost wanted it to be a surprise. It might be nice to go to the event and catch Harrison off guard, reunite and not be so anxious about it all.

Harrison tried his hardest to keep staying awake, but after two and a half hours of talking, Caleb heard the soft breaths of sleep. He didn't mind.

Eleanor would be lying if she said she hadn't noticed the change in her brother's mood after the royals visited. It wasn't a bad change, per say, but his time was no longer hers. She notes that he easily bent to Dad's will, he respected orders more, he behaved better. At first, she didn't understand. She missed the fun brother.

Late in the night, she slips into her brother's room in hopes they would sneak down to the kitchen and raid the freezers for ice cream. Instead, she finds her brother asleep, his day clothes still on, not at all under the covers, and his phone still on a long, silent phone call. The contact name was *Just Harrison* . She frowns. Carefully, she pulled a throws blanket over him and glances around the room. Her eyes skim over the invitation sitting on his desk, the RSVP ticked as attending.

She didn't understand, necessarily. But she saw enough to get it. She's a smart kid, and hell, she does it too. You have to play the system if you want it to benefit you. If you want something, you work for it. You suck up to the right people, you look cute in the right magazines, make the family name look good, and suddenly the world is yours.

She wants her fun brother back, but something tells her that he's far from gone. Just hiding.

Diya comes to Sweden with him, per Dad's request. Caleb was sure that Dad would need her more, but alas, his father wished for her presence, willing for her to keep an eye on Caleb, ensure that the contract was obeyed, as well as just keeping a mindful eye of people that the president may want to be in contact with. International galas are the perfect place to have your name spoken.

Caleb is staying in the same hotel as Harrison, just two floors down. Diya has a room just down the hall from Caleb, too. It's beautiful, spacious, and amazingly quiet despite the hotel being filled with international guests. Diya settles in as Caleb gets himself ready for the event tonight.

He takes a long shower under hot water with amazing water pressure. The tension building up in his shoulders and neck wash away. The exhaustion floods off his mind and down the drain. He has something else to focus on. Something better.

Someone does his hair for him. He kind of hates it, he won't lie. He's not a fan of a stranger touching him. They lean their body against his shoulders and their fingers in his hair creep him out. He wants to shake them off and get his personal space back. He always does his own hair— why today was any different, he's not sure.

Someone else also picked out his suit. It was actually rather stunning. It wasn't his usual style. Typically he takes a more casual approach to dressing up— a couple buttons undone, jacket unbuttoned. Simple. Someone had paid his team to put him in this suit though, and he

would be a fool to not wear a suit he was paid to show up in.

It's a deep, emerald green. Almost black. The slacks fit fairly well to his hips and thighs, but they don't hug his lower legs too tightly. It was paired with a cream button down and a mixed fabric jacket, velvet and satin, the velvet a slightly lighter shade of the same green, making floral and viney patterns. He liked it. It was a little fancy for him, but he liked it.

His phone rings. *Just Harrison* pops up with the contact photo being a random stock image Caleb stole off the internet of a prince. It's not even a photo of Harrison, which he finds hilarious.

"Hey, what's up?" Caleb greets, wincing as someone starts touching his neck and shoulders in an attempt to fix his jacket. He holds the phone to his ear, training his attention on Harrison's voice instead of the foreign hands on him.

"I haven't had a second alone in perhaps two days," Harrison huffs on the other end, a quiet murmur of sounds in the background. "I swear. I've barely been able to shower without someone pestering me."

"So you call someone else to bother you?" Caleb jokes, retracting at a sudden reach from a stranger, then mouthing an apology to them and attempting to sit still.

"It's different when it's you," Harrison says simply. Caleb cracks a slight smile, but instantly hides it from view, knowing how many people were looking at him. "Are you busy?"

"Just a bit. I can talk though," Caleb offers. "I'm in a similar situation. Lots of people. Not a lot of space."

"Such is our lives," Harrison says with an attempt at humor. "I have the gala tonight and I've been told just about nothing. I don't even know who I'm sitting with. I am… painfully awful at social interaction-"

"I know."

"Shut it," Harrison shot back. "I just don't know what the hell people talk about. Especially with a language barrier. I know French, Spanish, and German, but what if I get placed with some Swedes who don't speak any of those?"

"It's a room full of rich assholes. They will know a little English,"

Caleb reassures. “If you get stuck, just talk to me.”

“I’ll look like an asshole if I’m on my phone all night. I think my grandmother would put a hit on me,” Harrison jokes. “Monty, I’m fine. I promise.”

“Tell her I say hi,” Caleb beams.

“Who are you talking to?” Madame Montgomery sighs. “We still have-”

“It’s just Caleb. He says hi,” Harrison reassures.

“Tell him I send my best,” Montgomery responds, instantly in a better mood. Caleb relaxes slightly. “Can I pester you for five minutes? You still haven’t even done your hair, my lord-”

“Uh oh. Someone’s in trouble,” Caleb teases.

“It’s always something,” Harrison agrees with a light smile. “I have to go before Monty yells at me. I’ll talk to you tonight.”

“You got it,” Caleb responds, letting the call end.

They are at the event by 6:00 PM.

Diya seems to be losing her mind over the event, despite them being far from the most important people there, and having only Caleb to keep an eye on. She seems stressed in the car ride there, anxiously twisting her curls around a finger, obsessively texting lord-knows-who.

“Hey,” Caleb nudges her. “We’re fine.”

“ *You’re* fine,” Diya shot back. “I am going to have a breakdown.”

“Why? This is probably the easiest event we’ve ever done,” Caleb says back, gently adjusting his cufflinks.

“Because I feel like I’m missing something,” Diya scowls. “I’m typically chasing after the five of you and your parents. Managing just you is painfully simple. I feel like I’m forgetting half of the stuff we need. Do we have our invitation?”

“Yes. It’s in Chris’s hand right now,” Caleb chuckles. “Di, I promise, it’s fine. I’m a big boy. I know how to handle myself. You can try to just have fun tonight.”

“You can be an adult all you want. You can even be a trustworthy adult. But I will never be able to relax and have fun,” she sighs.

“I’ll find a way to make today fun for you,” Caleb insists. “If that means creating a little chaos, just let me know, and I’ll hook it up for you.”

“Don’t you dare,” Diya’s eyes instantly widen, her fingers no longer obsessively working her hair, and instead her attention training on Caleb. Her energy switches from fearful and anxious to focused and stern, just with the threat. Caleb shrugs, just to mess with her, just to keep her on her toes, just to make sure she feels a little better about herself, give her something to do. “You are a shithead.”

Harrison is already there when they arrive. There’s lots of press all over the place, and it’s slightly intimidating, seeing so many cameras always pointed at one or both of them. Caleb greets people he should be greeting and gives friendly smiles to those he doesn’t know, but eventually snuck up behind Harrison, sending Madame Montgomery a smile when she noticed his presence. Caleb very gently rests a hand on the middle of Harrison’s back, polite and careful to not look too touchy in front of the reporters.

Instantly, at the physical touch, thrown off by a pressure directly behind him, he shot his attention over his shoulder. At first, his face was nervous, concerned with whoever the hell was touching him. His eyes widen ever so slightly, and his cheekbones raise with the sudden grand smile that crosses his face.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” Harrison says with a small laugh, equally as concerned about not being too suspicious in front of constantly rolling cameras. Harrison wraps an arm around Caleb and hugs him briefly, both giving bro-like back-pats. It felt stupid, but any touch was better than nothing. “When did you get here?”

“This morning,” Caleb says back with a little grin.

“Last we spoke, you said you wouldn’t be able to get over here,” Harrison raises his eyebrows, scanning Caleb’s suit with hungry eyes before slowly pulling a couple inches back. Don’t be seen.

“I pulled some strings,” Caleb shrugs. “You’re not being sat with any Swedes, by the way.”

“Oh my God,” Harrison’s face flushes pink, and he looks away to hide the pure adoration he had for the man standing beside him. “You are

such an attention hog."

"It's fun, messing with you," Caleb shrugs, casually fixing his jacket again before strolling forward with Harrison. He busies his hands with his cuffs. If he didn't, he might rest one on Harrison' back, or shoulder, or worse, take his hand as a whole.

They lucked out and got a table toward a back corner of the room, darkened with the lack of natural light. They sat with mostly just their team, with Diya and Montgomery sat side by side and whispering with one another, smiling, as well as a few of the Danish royalty members. Harrison and Caleb sat beside one another, gently nudging each other's feet under the table. Hidden by a tablecloth, Caleb's hand gently traced over Harrison's kneecap, his thumb slowly smoothing over the joint, not applying too much pressure. Just enough to barely feel his presence.

Diya barely even notices Caleb the entire night, seeming perfectly content in her newfound friendship with Harrison's personal Diya, Madame Montgomery. Chris was also there, often laughing and enjoying his time with Harrison's staff, too. It was kind of sweet, seeing their friendships grow as Harrison and Caleb got closer.

Caleb is sure the night will be captured by plenty of photos of his table laughing and smiling together. Even the Danish royalty seemed to be giggling along with them. It was a really fun night where a bunch of politicians raised a ton of money for some charity about world hunger.

This is where Caleb belonged. Not a stuffy White House where he's afraid of breathing too loud. He loved his family, really, he did. His father is a pain in his ass, and his mother can be too much, and his siblings drive him up the wall, but he loves them. But this was nice. Yeah, maybe he was surrounded by the dreaded rich snobs of the world, and it was all a little too fancy for his taste, but he liked this moment. Sat close to Harrison, and making friends with figureheads from another part of the world, and seeing his family's manager laugh with her head thrown back. He's never seen Diya so happy.

"Bathroom?" Harrison murmurs quietly so only Caleb could hear him. Caleb gave him a single nod. "Wait a few minutes then get up. I'll be in the one upstairs."

Harrison excuses himself slightly louder to the rest of the table. Caleb continues his conversation with the table, slightly more awkward

without Harrison to bounce off of. After almost five minutes, he does the same. Diya shot him a warning look, as if to say *don't do anything stupid.*

He finds Harrison in a dead silent bathroom on the second floor. No one was there, other than Harrison, who was leaning against the counter and scrolling through his phone. Harrison breaks out in a smile at the sight of him.

"Hey," Harrison stuffs his phone in his pocket and instantly moves toward him, holding his arms out. He insisted on a proper hug now that they were out of the reporters and guests' sight. Caleb relaxes, his public persona washing away without the threat of his father seeing any photos of their interactions. Harrison winds his arms around Caleb's neck, turning his face in, his mouth pressed against Caleb's jaw. Music is radiating through the floor, a slight vibration to the walls even from here. "You look handsome."

"Thank you," Caleb murmurs into his shoulder, taking a deep breath of whatever it was on Harrison's person that made him smell like comfort. A million images of every season at once dances through his head, a million ways to describe how this moment felt, sitting in the middle of his chest, warm, almost uncomfortably so. "I like you in navy." He pulls back and looks Harrison over. He thumbs at the collar on Harrison's jacket, brushing across the skin on his neck. Harrison smirks to himself, instinctively tipping his chin up, welcoming the touch.

"Yeah?" Harrison hums. Caleb nods, flickering his attention between the color of Harrison's suit, royal and regal, to his throat, perfectly available and painfully porcelain, and finally his eyes, warm and comfortable, a place Caleb wouldn't mind resting. "As much as I want to say I like you in this, I am… very colorblind and have no clue if this is black or brown."

"It's green," Caleb laughs, gently tipping his head back into one of Harrison's hands on his neck. "Your hands are cold."

"Yours are not," Harrison laughs along, gently smoothing a patch of hair down at the base of Caleb's skull. "Green. Black. Whatever. I think I prefer you without any of it."

"Oh, really?" Caleb cracks a stupid smile. "That's all I am to you?"

"Oh of course," Harrison says sarcastically, making Caleb laugh more. "What else am I supposed to like? Your personality? That's difficult.

You're an American, afterall."

"Fuck you," Caleb rolls his eyes and playfully pushes Harrison away. Harrison's hands were so icy, Caleb's skin felt like it was on fire without him touching it.

"Is that a threat or an offer?"

"You're an idiot," Caleb shot back.

"An idiot you can't keep your hands off of," Harrison shrugs casually, leaning against the counter again.

"Bet."

"Gladly," Harrison smirks. "I bet you won't be able to keep your hands to yourself the rest of the night."

"Yes I can. I am a respectable man," Caleb insists.

"Yeah? Prove it."

Harrison looks so freaking cute here. He's relaxed, his posture not quite as straight, and his hands folded in front of him. One leg crossed in front of the other, head tilted to the side, and a frisky smirk on his face. The bathroom lighting almost gives him a halo-effect.

"What are we betting on?"

"Consider it an IOU ," Harrison suggests. "You manage to do it, I owe you… something. It's up to you to decide what. Same for the other way around. You can't handle it, well… Looks like I have something over you."

"Deal," Caleb says instantly. "Starting now?"

"No," Harrison scoffs with a laugh. "Starting in…. Ten seconds."

"Good," Caleb nods once before taking two swift steps toward Harrison and stealing a kiss. Harrison smiles against his lips, leaning up and holding Caleb there for a long moment, absorbing the touch, soaking up every second of Caleb, sponge-like.

They return to the table separately. Caleb is careful to inch his chair slightly further away to prevent accidentally reaching out. He was determined to win. If there's anything that gets him pumped up, it's a friendly competition. Even in terms of games he doesn't like to play, if

there is something on the line, whether it be a more challenging competition, or a favor , or something material, he is 1000% down to compete. More often than not, he wins, too.

The event lasts until late in the night. Caleb has a couple drinks, supervised by Diya, of course. He's not much of a drinker, though, no matter how often he does it for events, so he is pretty much done after two glasses of bitter wine. He chews on some gum to get rid of the taste and keeps the conversations flowing with his table until the event ends. Cocky, happy that they were ticking down to the last few minutes before they ended the bet, he was just excited to go back to the hotel. They stay seated at their table while most of the room floods out, not wanting to be caught in too big of a crowd.

"I think I did pretty good tonight," Caleb says to Diya with a proud smile. "Are you willing to report that back to Dad?"

"Yes, Caleb, you behaved yourself. I'm very impressed. Typically, you'd be setting something on fire at this point," Diya rolls her eyes. "I'm going to make sure the car is here. Don't run off. I will have Chrisopher tackle you."

"I played football. I could take him," Caleb jokes as she walks off.

"You played football?" Harrison asks curiously, leaning forward onto his elbows with a small smile. "Which one?"

"American," Caleb shot back.

"Meathead," Harrison scoffs, chuckling to himself and sipping some more of his own wine.

"I fucking killed it in high school, dude," Caleb insists with a smirk. "I was hot shit. That's why I'm such a catch."

"You're just cocky," Harrison rolls his eyes. "Your ego could fit a football stadium."

"How do you think I managed to be a quarterback?" Caleb says in response, knocking his knee under the table. He doesn't even realize he did it, and continues talking with Chris, who was also a football player, once upon a time. Harrison found it painfully amusing, watching Caleb not pay attention to his own actions.

Whilst Caleb was busy thinking he had successfully won the bet, in reality, Harrison was keeping a silent tally of all the sly touches. Their

bumped knees were far from the first. He at one point rested his arm on the back of Harrison's chair, and while he bounced his knee, their legs were almost constantly touching. He once nudged Harrison under the table, but Harrison was unsure if it was an accident or not, so he didn't count it.

They return to the hotel in separate cars.

"Did you have fun?" Caleb asks Diya, feeling pretty proud of himself despite very much losing the challenge. Diya glances at him and lets herself relax. Lets herself smile.

"I did," she nods once. "I think I like traveling with you when we're not doing high-stress events. You are very tolerable like this."

"Thank you," Caleb nods curtly, directing his attention forward to watch through the front windshield. "You seemed to get along well with Harrison's staff. This might work out well. Eleanor and I can see Kate and Harrison, you can see the staff. We can be our own little friend group."

"Cute," Diya scoffs. "I've actually known Harrietta since well before I started working with your father. It's only recently that we've had the pleasure of spending time together though."

"Harrietta?"

"Madame Montgomery?" Diya fills in. "She has a first name, dear."

"Oh," Caleb blinks a few times. "Of course. I knew that."

"I'm sure of it," she glances up at the driver, who had the music cranked, and his earpiece in, then down at her phone again. "So, Harrison."

"Harrison," Caleb confirms. "He is, in fact, a person who exists, yes."

"You must be quite happy about his existence," Diya hums quietly, typing out a text to someone and hitting send. Caleb is silent. "He's cute. I don't blame you."

"What?" Caleb recoils. Diya eyes him with an amused smile. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm just saying, good on you. He's rather handsome, and he seems like a good kid."

“What are you implying, Di?” Caleb asks simply. His stomach churns. He feels like he could throw up. His body felt like he had been submerged in ice cold water, with no way to surface for air.

“I won’t be telling your parents, if that’s what you’re afraid of,” Diya hums, looking away from him again. Caleb opens his mouth to rebut her statements, defend himself from the allegations, no matter how true they were. No sound comes out. “Honey, you think I'm a fool. You cannot pull the sheet over my eyes. I have been chasing your ass around for years now, and to think I wouldn’t notice… I’m honestly rather offended that you think I couldn’t tell.”

“You’re insane, Diya.”

“Am I?” Diya cocks her head to the side. “You’ve never once been interested in international affairs. You never wanted anything to do with galas or charity events, and you sure as hell hated all of the British Royal family up until, what was it… the trip to London?” She raises an eyebrow. “If I am crazy, then surely I will find you in your own bed at random intervals tonight. But you and I both know I’m smarter than that.”

Caleb is chewing on his cheek, scared to speak, scared to do anything at all. Does he tell Harrison? Does he tell anyone? Does he keep trying to deny it? Skip staying with Harrison tonight, tell him someone was suspicious of them, so he’s playing it safe, or… or….

“I don’t mind,” Diya insists. “If you’re safe, who am I to judge?”

“You’re my manager. Your job is to judge my every move,” Caleb whispers in response, refusing to make eye contact. He presses his hands into his bouncing knees, wiping his sweat from his palms.

“It is,” she nods. “And my judgement of this is… you have kept it discreet. No one has noticed, not even Henrietta. You are careful to not let this affect your jobs. You play a good role in front of the cameras. You are doing my press management job for me. I won’t complain.”

Caleb still feels sick. If Mom found out, he’s in trouble. But if Dad finds out…

He’s dead.

He’s a goner.

Diya's boss is his father. Diya reports to him. If he orders her to tell him everything, she has to. Either that, or lose her job. That's a big if , but the weight of it is enough to crush Caleb where he sits.

He thinks what scares him most is that he genuinely doesn't know what would happen if Dad found out. Maybe he would be kicked out, or excommunicated from his family. Dad would yell. He would scream, throw a fit. Caleb can't say for certain that his father wouldn't swing at him. Even if Mom is level headed and empathetic, she might have to side with Dad, too. For her safety. For Danny and Eleanor.

"How did you know?"

"The texts and calls," she says simply. "You were glued to your phone. The second you got a notification, you dropped everything to look at. I figured it was a girl in one of your classes." Caleb nods. "Then you invited him to the States for your birthday and spent more time with him than Quinn.Your own best friend couldn't track you down during the party."

"How did you hear about that?"

"He asked me if I knew anything," she shrugs.

"And you said?"

She's quiet for a moment. She looks over at him, eyebrows laced together, a frown pulling on the corners of her lips. She reaches a hand out and rests it on his.

"I'm not going to tell anyone, love," her voice falls hushed, squeezing his hand gently. "I told him I didn't know where you went. That's all."

"Okay," he nods once, sniffling. "He- He has no idea. And-and I barely know what I'm doing right now, so the last thing I need is-"

"Sweetheart?" She interrupts. He's silent, looking at her hopefully. God, maybe she can fix this. She can use her magic powers and fix it all. Make them a straight couple, and make Caleb not the son of the president, and make Caleb's father a kind man. She is like his fairy godmother, fixing things, saving the day. He needs her to fix this, too. "Your sexuality is no one's business. I will do my damned best to ensure you get enough privacy to figure this all out." He nods quickly. Yes. That works. "You don't owe me an explanation. You don't have to tell me anything at all. My job is to make sure you are safe, and that the media is under control. Your job is to be happy, and if that means

fucking the Prince of England in secret… well, you do you." She pulls back. "I support you. No matter how stupid any of this is, your heart is your own. Just tell me how to best support you, and I will."

"Support me by forgetting it," Caleb murmurs under his breath, sinking lower in his seat. At the bare minimum, he wants to forget that she knows.

When they get to the hotel, they go in opposite directions. Caleb goes to his room first, slowly sinking onto his bed and trying to catch his breath. He's shaking like a wet dog in the rain, and that ball of excitement and joy that sat in his chest has become a cancerous tumor of fear. He lays flat on his bed, arm blocking his eyes. Slow inhale, long exhale. Again, and again, and again. That damned fear that sat in his heart spreads to his lungs, his windpipe feeling choked. Then through his arms. The once electricity that came with Harrison's touch was now blinding pain, his nerve endings on fire.

There's a knock on his door.

Big breath in. Shake it off. Straight face, literally.

He goes and opens the door. He's not sure if he's excited or terrified to see Harrison on the other side.

"Just wanted to say," Harrison hums, eyebrows raised suggestively, smiling. "You lost the bet."

"No I didn't," Caleb frowns, taken aback. "I absolutely won that."

"I have a running list," Harrison insists, pulling out his phone. Caleb sidesteps to allow him access to the room. "9:02, you touched my right shoulder. 9:12, you rested your arm on my chair. 9:13 you bumped my knee with yours," Harrison reads aloud, smiling to himself. "9:20, you nudged my foot, but I don't know if that was an accident or not, so I won't count it."

"Seriously?" Caleb cracks a small smile, letting the fear bleed out of him. Pump his veins full of blood instead of poison.

"I have a list that takes up two full pages of a Google Docs. Yes, seriously," Harrison smirks. "I win."

"What did you win again?" Caleb asks, voice softening as he sits on the edge of his bed, watching Harrison pace through his room, still reading off some of the time stamps. "I get it, I get it. I failed. What

were the conditions?”

“Just an IOU,” Harrison shrugs casually, but that evil smirk never fading. “I might pin it on you when you least expect it.”

“Easy now,” Caleb chuckles as Harrison decides to set his phone down. He moves in so he stands between Caleb’s knees, arms rested on his shoulders. Cold fingers once again return to Caleb’s neck, the touch beyond soothing. Caleb’s eyes flutter closed, soaking up the touch greedily.

“Are you doing okay?” Harrison asks quietly, his lips tugged downwards. “You’re all tense.”

“I’m fucking exhausted,” Caleb admits softly, hand resting on Harrison’s hip and pulling him closer, ever so slightly.

“Do you want me to go so you can sleep?” Harrison offers. Caleb shook his head, opening his eyes again and smiling at the sight of Harrison already looking at him. “Do you want me to stay so you can sleep?”

“Maybe…” Caleb hums sheepishly.

“Okay. At the very least, don’t sleep in your suit. As dapper as you look, it wouldn’t be comfortable,” Harrison hums, carefully working on the tie around Caleb’s neck. “Chin up?”

“I can get it,” Caleb insists. Harrison hums in response, the tie laid untied and flat against his shoulders. He popped a couple buttons, leaning in to leave a kiss to his neck. “Nevermind.”

“Hm?”

“Nothing,” Caleb pulls Harrison in more by the belt loops, memorizing the feeling of the buttery softness against his skin. Harrison trails the kiss up his neck, against the base of his jaw, then the corner of his mouth. Caleb dips his head into a proper kiss.

Harrison is unsure what changed within the less than thirty minutes they had been apart for the commute back to the hotel, but he could physically feel the difference in Caleb’s body, the way his muscles contracted and his hands trembled so viciously. He didn’t want to pester him too much, and didn't want to scare him off. His hands map Caleb’s torso, the back of his neck, weaving through his hair, anything to help settle him. Caleb desperately leaned into his touch, clung to

his body, ate up every kiss.

Starving for touch that they went weeks without, Caleb's fingers dug into Harrison's skin greedily. If Harrison was lucky, maybe it would leave lasting marks to remind him of their time together. Caleb stood from his chair and, with hands on Harrison's hips, pressed him back into his bed. Harrison laughed as they fell into the mattress together. Caleb swallowed the sound and nipped at Harrison's throat greedily, hungrily, demandingly.

Harrison held onto the tails of Caleb's tie, well after he had pushed the rest of Caleb's clothing away. He kept Caleb close enough to reach. Caleb wasn't mad about it.

It's a quiet night. Caleb lends Harrison a shirt to sleep in, and they snuggle in peaceful silence with nothing but each other's breaths to be heard. Caleb matches his breathing to Harrison's, his head tucked against Harrison's back, fingers trickling over Harrison's abdomen, earning tensing muscles and ticklish squirms.

Harrison sleeps easily, warmed by Caleb's presence and comforted by the pressure behind him. He's not sure what made it so comfortable. He's never shared a bed before meeting Caleb. Not once. He never had sleepovers, never had friends, or partners. Lord knows he never crawled into Mum and Dad's bed as a child. This was all brand new to him. And yet, he feels like something is missing when he's in an empty bed, like Caleb was always meant to be there.

Caleb doesn't sleep. Not a wink. But he lays there, listening to Harrison's lungs and thumping heart, imagining the blood that flows through his body like a calming lazy river. Everything is always so harmonious about Harrison, even in the most chaotic of times. Even when Caleb feels like his skin may melt off, like he could rip his own eyes out, Harrison somehow reminds him of a stuffed toy that a child clings to for a little too long, like a blanket that makes him feel safe and protected from the monsters in his closet. Caleb is far from touchy, far from a physically affectionate person, but there is no place he would rather be at this moment than here, breathing in Harrison's serenity and safety.

Chapter End Notes

> OK, this chapter was faster paced, yes, but I still worked my ass off on it. I literally spent like three days writing this chapter, and it is also the reason why I ended up submitting SEVERAL

assignments late to my classes, but such are hyperfixations, yknow?

We're getting into the drama. Dun dun dun... If any of you were unaware, I am a MASSIVE angst writer. When I was popular on other platforms, my followers specifically followed me for angst and emotional turmoil. So I'm always really excited when it comes time to write more of it. I also have two published novels (not sure if I want to share those, just because I'm nervous about doxxing myself on accident) and those are both also angst-heavy, so, uh... prepare yourselves? I guess? I did tell yall to keep an eye on the tags.

I really REALLY appreciate the love this story has been getting. I especially love the comments that point out their favorite lines/ excerpts. It literally makes my day and inspires me so much. So thank you. Hopefully I'll have another chapter out in a couple days. Happy Tuesday yall :)

Chapter 13: Our Normal

Chapter Summary

> Caleb and Harrison are struggling with the separation of "normal" and "THEIR normal".

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harrison wakes alone, the bed beside him having gone cold from a long absence. He gently pulled on the loose collar of the shirt he was wearing, sleepily thumbing at the soft cotton. The shirt, despite Harrison sleeping in it all night, smelled like Caleb; like lavender scented detergent and a hint of his cologne. Harrison forgot he was wearing Caleb's shirt until that moment, comforted by a person who wasn't there.

Light filters through the curtains. He hides from it, burying his face in the pillow. He needed a moment to properly wake up and not immediately be blinded by the sun. Slowly, he pushes himself upright, hands rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and his body feeling heavy. The door opens, and Harrison jumps, looking up at the entrance. Caleb's body slots through the door, carefully shutting it behind him with the quietest click he can manage.

"Sorry, just me," Caleb whispers, giving a small smile. He didn't look well rested. If anything, he looked more tired than yesterday, between the dark circles and how bloodshot his eyes were. Caleb was covered in sweat, pulling on the shirt that clung to his skin, as if he had just belly flopped into a pool.

"Where'd you go?" Harrison yawns, sitting back against the pillows, arms around himself for the comfort of touch. He would do anything for it to be last night again, the pressure against his back, feeling every exhale against his neck.

"Workout," Caleb shrugs off, pulling the sweat stained shirt off and tucking it into a plastic bag with some other previously worn clothes. "The hotel has a pretty decent gym."

"I was unaware that you…" Harrison is unsure how he wants to finish this sentence, so he doesn't. His eyes train on the well-used muscles in Caleb's back and upper arms, a sheen to his skin. Caleb looks over his

shoulder and raises an eyebrow, smiling at Harrison who had become too distracted to even attempt at finishing his sentence.

“I’m gonna shower,” Caleb announces, grabbing a towel and approaching Harrison, leaning over the bed to leave a soft good-morning - kiss to his lips. “If you’re interested, you can come with me.”

Caleb cracks a smile as Harrison instantly clambers out of bed to follow him in.

The hotel shower was designed by Gods, being large enough to fit far more than just Harrison and Caleb. Multi-directional shower heads made it so neither would freeze, either. The two are all giggles and sleepy smiles, perfectly hot water raining over Caleb’s aching body, and warming Harrison again from his estimated couple hours alone. One arm thrown around Caleb’s neck, the two snicker in the midst of a kiss, enjoying their time being together, silly, and nothing short of their authentic beings. Hidden behind closed doors, walls, and an influx of steam-- there was no one around to steal this moment from them. There’s no need to hide from their staff, friends, family. They can just exist in time.

“This weekend was fun,” Harrison whispers against Caleb’s mouth. Caleb nods, dipping his head in to kiss Harrison’s neck. Instinctively, Harrison tips his head out of the way, giving him a better opening. Caleb locates Harrison’s shoulder and collarbone, his partner’s fingers working through his hair at the roots, encouraging him to keep going. Harrison laughs softly at the feeling of Caleb’s teeth nipping at his skin. “You are such trouble.”

“Part of the fun,” Caleb mumbles into his skin, pressing a soft kiss to the slowly forming hickey that will be for no one's eyes but theirs, with Harrison’s ridiculous dress codes and extensive privacy rules.

“I can easily do that too,” Harrison threatens.

“Yeah?” Caleb pulls back, gently holding Harrison’s jaw in his hand, thumb trailing over Harrison’s lower lip. “The challenge is finding a place they won’t see it. At least I can take my shirt off at a pool.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Harrison laughs, leaning his head more into Caleb’s hand. “I’m sure I could find something.”

“Yeah, right,” Caleb rolls his eyes.

“Wanna bet?” Harrison hums, his thumb tracing a patch of skin on Caleb’s hip, making his breath hitch.

“No,” Caleb blushes. “I’ve learned since last night.”

“Good,” Harrison nods with a teasing smile, releasing Caleb's hip and carefully pushing Caleb’s damp hair away from his face. Any of his confidence, his lust, his desire, is washed away at the sight of Caleb’s heavy eyelids, tired smiles, darkened eyes. “You didn’t sleep.”

“I’m an insomniac,” Caleb shrugs off. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not healthy.”

“I’m *fine* ,” Caleb insists. Harrison doesn’t believe him. That weight that sat on Caleb’s shoulders late last night never got lifted. The tension was still prevalent, his mannerisms dulled, and motions slower. “Listen… You’ll know when it’s time to worry about me. For now… drop it. I’m just really bad at sleeping. You said it yourself. I move a lot. And I wake up a lot. It’s just how it is.”

“Okay,” Harrison nods, eyes still soft, frown still present. Caleb wants to wipe it off of Harrison’s face, wants to just move on already. “If you need me to do something different, tell me.”

“Don’t change anything,” Caleb reassures. “You are… absolutely perfect. Just like this. Exactly, perfectly, precisely everything I need.”

“Okay,” Harrison gives in a tiny smile, just to make him feel better, and carefully pulls him into a tight hug, scalding water blanketing them in a sense of safety. Harrison couldn’t tell if this was Heaven or Hell.

Harrison was smart enough to grab a change of clothes at his own hotel the night before, just in case. Harrison changes into some slacks and a plain white button down, finger combing his damp hair out of his eyes while Caleb groggily gets himself ready for the day, too. Harrison flops down on Caleb’s bed on his back, and Caleb’s phone rings with Diya’s contact popping up. The photo is sweet-- one of Diya hugging what appears to be a very young Caleb. He was no older than thirteen in the photo, still shorter than her by a significant amount.

“Diya is calling you,” Harrison calls toward the bathroom. Caleb instantly drops everything and takes the call.

“Hey,” Caleb greets, running a hand through his hair and pacing back

toward the bathroom, away from Harrison. “No- no, yeah. That’s fine. I think Harrison and I wanted to grab breakfast before our flights.” Caleb shot Harrison a look. Harrison nods, smiling. “I know.”

Harrison presses himself up on his elbows, watching with his eyebrows raised. He can only imagine what Diya was saying on the other side, making Caleb look more drained, if possible. Caleb pinches the bridge of his nose, leaning his shoulder against the wall, quiet mumbles of vague statements like yeah and I know .

“Okay. I’ll let you know later,” Caleb concludes. “I don’t know! I- Diya? Diya-” he huffs. “I will deal with my mother later. Tell her I will be home tonight, and if she’s still stressed by then, I will happily talk to her when I’m not half way across the world.” There's a murmur on the other end. “I know she-- Diya I will hang up.” There’s a moment of silence. “Okay. Yep. Got it. I’ll text you updates. Chris will be with us. Okay? Okay. Bye.”

He hangs up, turning off his phone and groaning. He immediately starts toward Harrison, flopping down on the bed face-first beside him. Harrison runs a hand across his shoulders, Caleb turning and pressing his face into Harrison’s abdomen.

“You okay?” Harrison hums, barely a whisper.

“Fine,” Caleb grumbles. Harrison hesitates. Caleb picks his head up again, scowling. “Dude, seriously, if you keep getting all soft and worried about me, I will gladly just go home now.”

“ *Dude* , ” Harrison mocks, pulling away from him and sitting upright again. “I didn’t do shit to you, so lose the attitude.”

For a long moment, there’s a stand off of unwarranted aggression, both equally as annoyed. Caleb, mad about something he can’t talk about, and Harrison, mad that Caleb refuses to talk. Caleb breaks eye contact, refusing to look at someone who felt so warm when he felt like he was being stabbed through the chest with a shard of ice. He refuses to let Harrison win this one.

Harrison is unsure if the emotion he’s feeling is even anger. Is he angry with Caleb, or just upset that something was left unspoken? They aren’t together. They aren’t in a formal relationship, and to expect anything more than what they currently give and receive? That's their own fault. Harrison shouldn’t expect any kind of emotional maturity or depth to their interactions. They were just two people that needed some sense of intimacy that they can’t find

anywhere else, being in the positions they are.

But that's not what Harrison wants their relationship to be. He doesn't want to be in a "friends with benefits" situation. He wants to wake up next to Caleb every morning, to take showers under hot water whenever they want, to hold his hand, and kiss his face, and be his comfort at all times. He wants to tell secrets and be honest and have confidence in Caleb's security.

They can't be in that relationship. Even if Caleb wanted it too, they can't do that. It might not be what Harrison wants in its entirety, but it's enough. It's something he's not willing to lose. Not yet.

"You don't have to tell me anything," Harrison sighs, leaning in and touching his lips to Caleb's stubbly cheek, fingers trickling over his neck soothingly. Caleb puffs out a breath, his head lowering and shoulders relaxing. "But if you do, I'll listen." Caleb nods, biting the inside of his cheek and still not looking at Harrison. Eye contact has always intimidated him. He has unpleasant memories of his father drilling it into them that eye contact is everything. They are not worth someone's time without it. "I just care. No matter how much that annoys you… it's not something I control."

"I know," Caleb runs a hand over his face, sighing. This was all silly. It was all over-exaggerated. He picks his head up and flickers his eyes over Harrison's face— his perfect bone structure, the stubble on his chin, his expressive eyebrows, and finally, the warmth of his eyes. "I'm sorry for snapping at you."

"Nobody is perfect," Harrison cracks a sad smile.

You are Caleb thinks to himself.

"C'mere. Stop pouting," Harrison chuckles.

Calebs' eyes flutter closed, letting Harrison tip his chin up and kiss him. The room is silent other than the small sounds of their breaths, the slight rustle of the sheets beneath their bodies, and the sounds from outside. Caleb can hear birds twiddling a song outside, and the breeze brustling past the windows. Fall was approaching, the winter chill on its way.

Caleb pulls out of the kiss first, forehead still pressed to Harrison's, their noses brushed up together. Harrison continues to play with the hair at the base of Caleb's skull, feeling the rise and fall of his chest and shoulders. Harrison blinks his eyes open, surveying Caleb in his

peaceful state. Caleb, silent, just breathing, just being close to someone he trusts, just seaking that comfort. His face was slack, and tired. He has such long eyelashes, Harrison notices.

“I’m sorry,” Caleb whispers again. Harrison felt his heart hammer against his sternum. Why is he sorry?

“It’s okay…” Harrison was confused. They moved past this already. They apologized, they moved on. He doesn’t want this to bleed over into their day.

“Sorry,” Caleb sniffles, hiding his face in Harrison’s neck. Harrison is still for a long moment, unsure of what was happening. Was Caleb trying to tell him something? Was Caleb trying to end this? “I’m sorry.”

His voice was painful to listen to, thickened by exhaustion, both mental and physical. Especially with the visuals of unsteady hands and sluggish motions.

“Can I call in my favor?” Harrison requests quietly.

“Why?” Caleb had a lump sitting in his throat.

Equally, he was fearing the exact same thing as Harrison. He didn’t want this to end. He didn’t want to give Harrison up. Was he mad? How did Caleb have to make this better? “ Sorry” would rarely cut it. Sorry never cuts it. Dad said it all the time growing up. He can apologize all he wants for his mistakes, but that doesn’t make it better. He still has to face the consequences of his actions, no matter how harsh.

“Do me this favor: I want you to stop apologizing,” Harrison tells him, stroking Caleb’s neck, their bodies pressed together. Caleb took a sharp breath, nodding. “Either talk to me about what’s wrong, or just lay here with me until you feel better. But don’t apologize. I don’t want to hear it until you’ve done something wrong.”

“But-”

“Unless this is the start of an explanation, I don’t want to hear it,” Harrison insists. “Shut the hell up. Take a second to rest. You need it.”

Caleb gives up. The two lay on Caleb’s bed, Caleb curled up into his side, head tucked into the crook of Harrison’s neck. Harrison, every few minutes, kisses his temple and murmurs something sweet in his

ear. Eventually, Caleb stops responding, sleep finally grabbing him by the throat and forcing him under, drowning him in a mixture of dreams and nightmares.

Harrison gets up as Caleb naps, quietly texting his own staff to let them know his location. He informs his PPOs that he didn't leave the hotel, that he and Caleb were in Caleb's room coming up with breakfast ideas. It was only a half lie-- Harrison was trying to formulate something to grab for them for breakfast while Caleb sleeps. Or at the bare minimum, have a plan for when he wakes up.

At one point, while he's on the phone with Josephine, he looks over to Caleb, curled up on the bed with his arms around himself. He looked neither comfortable nor uncomfortable. He stirs every few minutes, restless even when is the first time he's slept in a couple days.

"I've seen a lot of photos get put out. I guess Caleb surprised you?" Josephine assumes.

"Yeah," Harrison smiles slightly, thinking about the sheer excitement of last night. The way his heart felt like it exploded at the sight of Caleb, and how he felt like he was on another plane of life the entire night. Their giggles in the bathroom, and watching Caleb try to talk in Spanish, a language that he never really uses outside of those types of events, and the thrill of every sly touch, knowing they had to be careful with the amount of press coverage on that event. "It was really lovely. I had fun."

"Good," Josephine's smile was audible, her voice giving away her motherly excitement for her little brother. "You and him seem to be really good friends now."

"Yeah," Harrison says with a smile of his own, eyes flickering to the sleeping boy, who stirred slightly. "It took me by surprise."

"Me too. You two were like arch nemesis'," Josephine jokes. "It's nice. I like seeing you happy. I've… I've never seen you like this before."

"Happy?"

"Happy," she shrugs. "Excited. Talkative. You've-- none of us have ever really had these friendships. So I'm just… I'm enjoying watching you experience it for the first time. Authentic friendship."

"...thank you," Harrison was unsure if he wanted to smile or cry.

None of us ever really had friends .

None of them had schoolyard friends to throw wood chips at, to get muddy with, to race down the slides and compete against on the swings to see who could get higher off the ground. They never had the sugar-highs, or one of those birthday parties with colorful balloons and character-themed cakes or decorations. Their parties were for the adults in their lives to attend, while the children got stuck into a room with a two hundred year old set of toys and told to play. Harrison is surprised he didn't get tetanus from some of the "toys" he played with as a child.

His friends growing up were his sisters, his cousins, other family members who were equally as sheltered and restricted as he was. When he went to college, his friends were kids clawing their way up the social ladder, seeing what kind of tricks Harrison could do. University years were reckless. None of those guys were friends. Harrison was a shell of a person. At times, he still feels like he is.

His phone call ends with Josephine when Caleb starts to wake. Harrison carefully moves into the bed again, tracing the outline of Caleb's face with feather light fingertips. Harrison kisses Caleb's head, waiting for him to fully wake.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep, I'm sorry," Caleb murmurs, turning his face into the mattress and groaning.

"It was a nice break," Harrison reassures. "You still want to go eat?"

"Is it too late?" Caleb pushes himself upright, checking his phone. "Brunch?"

"I'm down," Harrison agrees, carefully taking Caleb's face into his hands, swiping over his warm, pink cheeks with his thumbs and touching a soft kiss to his lips. "Feel better?" He nods. "Good."

The two go out to eat at a cute place toward the center of Stockholm. Harrison keeps a close eye on Caleb, who's still sluggish and sleepy. Caleb puts up a good front out in the public, though. Almost instantly upon stepping outside, he has the casual smile and laid back attitude, hands stuffed deep into his pockets to hide their fidgeting.

"So what's our plan?" Harrison asks, sipping his coffee, sat back in his chair. Caleb raises an eyebrow, waiting for him to explain. "When do I see you next?"

“Well, what’s the date?” Caleb checks his phone. “It’s early September. What’s the next event…”

“My birthday is in November,” Harrison offers. Caleb frowns.

“Too long,” Caleb hums. “Halloween?”

“Only the day before my birthday,” Harrison responds. Caleb nods slowly. “I think I have an event in… Three weeks? It’s at Kensington, for Josie’s birthday. She’s making it a charity event for the British Red Cross.”

“I’m not crashing your sister’s birthday,” Caleb scoffs.

“Let me at least talk to her first. Don’t just assume,” Harrison rolls his eyes, pulling out his phone too, sending a quick text to Josephine. “Hell. Bring Eleanor too. Make this fun.”

“Again, it’s Josephine’s birthday,” Caleb recalls. “I’m not-”

“Aaand... she said she wants you there,” Harrison turns off his phone, giving Caleb a bright smile. “She said you guys were already on the guest list. Ask Diya to see if you ever received the invite. I know Josie actually invited a couple other American’s too. One of her best friends is, uh… I forgot her name.” Harrison searches his brain for the name, knowing damned well Caleb probably knew the girl he was talking about too. Some political figure. At least, her Dad is. She’s going into journalism, or some kind of writer position for fashion. “First name Annika.”

“Beattie?” Caleb asks, eyes widening. “I grew up with Annika.”

“No way,” Harrison was taken aback. “ *I* grew up with Annika.”

“Annika and I both grew up in Atlanta. We went to school together and everything,” Caleb insists. “Her dad is some kind of American ambassador to England?”

“Her Dad was literally my father’s house-mate in Uni,” Harrison says, amazed. “That’s crazy.”

“How the hell did Annika let this slip past me?” Caleb asks. “I spoke to Annika, like, a week ago. She never told me you and her knew each other.”

“The more you know,” Harrison laughs. “Yeah, no, Annika will be

there. So now I guess you have to come. For me and for Annika."

"I've been convinced," Caleb muses, sipping his tea and smiling to himself. "Fine. When I see my mother tonight I'll ask her about it. It's not really her that we have to fight over it. I just have to make sure my father doesn't mind."

"If I have to, I'll have my grandmother personally request that your father lets you come."

"Yeah, good luck with that," Caleb chuckles. "You got your head in the clouds, dude."

Dude never sounded so affectionate. Harrison thinks of their conversation earlier, when the casual and overly distant phrasing drove him crazy. The snip to Caleb's voice was toxic, and stressful, and made Harrison ridiculously angry. He wondered what he did wrong to make Caleb upset, to make Caleb so lax, and unaffectionate. But here, when the stupid word dude was used as a replacement for words he can't say, pieced in like a metaphor for an endearment he can't show…

Harrison hated that stupid word in an entirely different way. He hates hiding behind a curtain of informalities to mask his heart and mind. No matter how advantageous their easygoing friendliness was for their public appearance, Harrison will always crave the way Caleb's voice floats like helium when they're alone.

Under the table, one of Harrison's ankles hooks around Caleb's. Caleb cracked a slight smile down at his food, shaking his head amusedly. He doesn't want to think about the rapid approach of their separation. He wants to sit here, with discreet touches out of the public's eyesight, smiling with Harrison, and not thinking about a world of responsibilities that await him back home.

Caleb leaves Sweden first. He's regretting not taking advantage of all their time together, of not stealing one last kiss, hugging him one more time, staying awake a little longer. He doesn't get any final goodbyes behind closed doors. Just a fake bro-hug that will satisfy the cameras at the airport watching them depart, and parting ways.

Diya can see the cogs turning in Caleb's head the entire flight home. She sat across from him, watching his mind work systematically, like a well-refined machine. He was blank-faced, staring out the window, sunk low in his seat, his fingers tracing his bottom lip. Diya wants to reach out, ask him what's wrong, or maybe ask about Harrison, but

she feels like this was the wrong moment. Today wasn't the day.

When they land, Diya immediately skirts off into a meeting with his father, and he is receiving texts from Mom saying *come to my office right when you land* . His heart plummets to his stomach, stuffing his phone away into his pocket. He drops his belongings by his bedroom and nods at Chris as they part ways.

He strolls toward her office, listening to her conversation from just outside her slightly open door. She was bickering with someone on the phone, he assumes by the silence she's met with after her side of the conversation. Carefully, he slots his head into the room, knocking quietly so as to not disturb her call too much. She peers up from her notepad and frowns.

She's mad.

"No, no- I- please do not cut me off, sir. I understand you are upset but please have respect for your superiors," Mom snaps at her counterpart, pointing her pen to the upholstered chair across from her desk. "No, you may not speak to my husband. He is not my keeper." She rather harshly writes another note on the yellow legal pad, an aggressive period slapped against the page before she sets her pen down. "I'm done with our conversation. You may speak with my secretary when you choose to try this again and set up another appointment."

With that, she hung up, the phone colliding with it's receiver in a loud clash . Caleb winced, squeezing his hands together in his lap.

"Hi honey," she huffs, running a hand over her face. "How was Sweden?"

"Pleasant. We had fun. It was productive. Diya got to see some friends," Caleb answers, his voice weak.

"You seem tired. Have too much fun last night?" Mom raises an eyebrow, slyly picking up her pen again, flipping to a fresh page and dating the top corner. At the top line, she just writes Caleb. Caleb flickers his attention between her drifting eyes to her pen.

"No. Just… tired," Caleb attempts a fake smile. Mom sees straight through it.

"You're not sleeping again," she assumes, writing a bullet point under his name.

“Mom, I-”

“Last we discussed, your insomnia was caused by the medication. That was our primary cause for taking you off of it,” Mom recalls. Caleb shifts in his seat slightly. “Is it school? Us? Harrison? What is stressing you out?”

“None of it,” he lies. She rolls her eyes. “Seriously, Ma, I’m fine. Just tired. You caught me at a bad moment.”

“Well, this is my only moment for the remainder of the week, so,” she sighs, opening her drawer and pulling out a black binder, labeled *CGC* .

Of course she has a binder for him.

When she opens the binder, he sees just how organized it is, too. Color coded tabs. The first section is dedicated to his legal records-- his birth certificate, his social security, his tax forms, everything. The second tab is school stuff. Report cards, transcripts, and test scores. Third tab is health related-- all the paperwork from being tested for ADHD, contact information for all his doctors, both from childhood and in adulthood. The final tab was mostly for the family stuff. Photos, and childhood drawings, and a macaroni necklace he made in preschool.

It was incredibly clinical, having his entire life displayed before him in a three-ring binder, five inches wide. Every documented moment of Caleb is laid out in that binder. Clippings from his first haircut and first magazine cover. His third grade book review. His PSAT scores. His blood type. A list of his friends in kindergarten in comparison to his friends in high school. None of it was authentic. None of it were cherished memories that Mom fondly recalls over Thanksgiving dinner, or tells him about as they look through a scrapbook. It’s a compilation of files, a binder filled with manila folders, like a criteria of items to diagnose him as himself.

“Tell me about school.”

“It’s fine. Fall semester just started. I’m finishing my gen-eds this semester,” Caleb murmurs. She nods.

“What's your current declared major?”

“I, uh… I don’t have one?”

Her pen stills, and for a moment, he thinks she was holding her

breath, waiting for him to say he was joking. The silence is painfully loud, screaming in his ears, and decimating his brain.

“Honey, tell me you’re kidding, please?” She requests, running a hand over her face. He doesn’t speak. “Okay. I’ll… I’ll talk to Diya about that one. Fine. Fine. Talk to- talk to me about something decent . Give me something to work with.”

“I-I-” he stammers, wracking his brain for some kind of fun fact about himself that she might not know. He cycles through all the ones he uses on his first day of classes. *My favorite book is ___. I like the band ___*. None of that works with Mom. “This… this is weird, Mom.”

“Huh?” She looks up from her notes again. “What do you mean it’s-- this is life , honey.”

“It’s not normal, though,” Caleb frowns. “Don’t you think it’s… it’s a little weird? Talking over my life like we’re business partners? Not everything is about work, Mom…”

“I’m glad one of us has the ability to say that,” Mom sighs. “My life is about work, Caleb. I come to this office, I check off my list, and I keep working. We don’t have the ability to sit around the table and talk about our day, or-or read you bedtime stories. We schedule meetings and we have professional conversations. You’re a big boy. You know this by now.”

“So none of this bothers you? At all?” Caleb asks, his shoulders dropping, his voice shaky. “How can you possibly have a chance to know your own children in this type of setting?”

“I know you more than you know you, dear,” Mom insists, patting the binder. “Everything is right here. Last I checked, you were the one asking me for your birth certificate, or-”

“My life isn’t a file in your cabinet, Mom!” Caleb insists. “I’m a person! Not-Not a folder compiled of legal documents and baby photos. I-I have a personality, and-and interests. I have friends, and-”

“I just updated your friends list to include the royals though-” Mom interrupts. Caleb gives up on talking. There’s no point in wasting his energy on someone who will never change their mind. “I just- I don’t understand why you’re upset. This is me showing that I care about you. I do. I care about you. I put a lot of effort into these files, and I happily set aside a lunch meeting to get some twenty minutes with you, and-”

“Twenty minutes?” Caleb asks. Mom nods. “That's it?”

“Baby that’s not what I meant-”

“Your schedule is pretty full,” Caleb concludes, standing from the chair and backing away. “I’ll save you some time and let myself out early. Go have your lunch meeting.”

“Caleb.”

He slips out of the room, quietly closing the door behind him. He doesn’t want any more eyes on him than the ones that already are. He wants to get far from here, from the White House, and the presidency, and the first family, and everything that comes with this life of his. He wants to be back in Sweden, listening to Harrison breath in and out, his heartbeat rhythmic and his skin gentle to the touch. The closest he will ever feel to normal are in those moments where he’s with the only other person who seems to empathize with how he feels.

Instead, he goes to his room. Because Harrison is an ocean away. He has to fend for himself.

Chapter End Notes

> I'll be honest.... I really hated this chapter. It's been done and editted for literally three days and I just,,,, dont want to post it. Because I didn't like it. But it contains all the details I wanted it to contain / needed to progress the story.
>
> So if this one is off, I'm sorry. But we're getting to the good stuff soon :) I work all day on weekends, so I'm not sure if I will have another one out before the weekend is over, but I shall try my best. Happy Saturday, yall.

Chapter 14: What Goes Unsaid

Chapter Summary

> Unspoken words of hardship, love, and pain. They hold it all close to their chest, convinced that one day, they will just die with it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He spent the following few days hiding out of sight, to avoid someone (cough cough, Diya , cough cough) grabbing him by the ear and dragging him back to his mother. A good amount of it was spent in his room, keeping up with a plethora of school work he had entirely forgotten about up until his conversation with Mom. He submits a quiz and two “discussion forums” late, and writes up the most bullshit paper he could possibly write for his *Integrate and Apply* gen-ed class. He just needs to pass this semester… and the next. Then the following four semesters after that. And somewhere in the mix, he has to choose a major. If he’s ambitious, a minor, too.

He’s sat in the solarium, trying his hardest to focus on a stupid assignment that’s been sat on his online classroom for about a week. He’s put off reaching out to his professor out of fear of sounding stupid, and now out of fear for the criticism of putting off the assignment. His head is pounding, and he’s spent the past ten minutes doodling some vague memory trapped in the forefront of his mind. It’s a pretty shit drawing, but for some reason, he was dedicated to drawing it.

A text comes through his laptop with a soft ping . Caleb winces, immediately turning off the ringer for his laptop, and pulls up the text. It was from Harrison, whom he was messaging about his class stresses, especially with his damned poetry class. He had told Harrison something along the lines of *i miss you, and I hate this. It hurts my brain.*

Just Harrison: If I had a flower for every time I thought of you, I could walk in my garden forever. -Alfred Lord Tennyson

His throat caught, rereading the text twice, three, four times over. Caleb wants to search love poems or romance quotes to impress him, too, but that feels inauthentic. If he had to Google his thoughts, then

maybe they were never his own. He sits there, staring at the brief message, feeling his chest explode with fireworks.

As beautiful as they are, Caleb is terrified of fireworks.

Finally, he recalls a quote that he had stuck in his head from a literature class he took back in his summer session of school.

*Caleb ! ******: My heart is so full of you, I can hardly call it my own - liana radulescu*

He tucks his chin onto his knees, sketching a tree in the forefront of his doodle, waiting for the next message. Harrison lets him sit for a while, lets Caleb feel the weight of their messages on his shoulders, and the fireworks in his chest. Caleb was unsure if he wanted more or less. He just knew he was instantly happier by the notification from *Just Harrison* another twenty minutes later.

Just Harrison: that was really cute. I liked that one.

Caleb blushes to himself, trying to be creative with his response. Perhaps another quote from some poetry or novel he read over the years, or perhaps a thought of his own, some words that belong to no one but him. But he is not the most creative of men, and his brain has been obliterated by school work. He considers just sending back some emoticon instead, but knew Harrison would probably be less than satisfied by that.

“Hey,” a voice greets from the doorway. Caleb slyly clicks off of his messages and instead swaps to his assignment again, not looking up at his brother. Andy approaches, plopping down on the couch beside him and looking over his shoulder. Caleb is staring at the blank document and his assignment sheet again, trying to pretend to be productive. “You good?”

“Yeah,” Caleb murmurs back. “Just busy.”

“Yeah?” Andy sits forward and squints, reading the assignment title. “That’s due tonight.”

“I know, Andrew,” Caleb huffs, running a hand over his face. “That's why I’m doing it.”

“Are you? It looks like you’re pouting and drawing… Grandma’s house?” Andy cocks his head to the side to look at the drawing.

“If Mom sent you, you can just go-”

“Mom didn’t send me, idiot,” Andy pushes him by the shoulder. Caleb scowls, moving away from his brother. “Dad did. Wanted me to check up on you. See how… how everything is going.”

“Everything is fine,” Caleb insists. “You’re distracting me.”

“You’re far from fine,” Andrew rolls his eyes. “You don’t even have a declared major.”

“Will you please leave?” Caleb pleads. Andrew is quiet. “Please? Just once, do something for me. Leave me alone. Let me finish my assignment. You can- You can scold me all you want after I submit this.”

He rubs his eyes, crunched up at his laptop, hoping to God that Andrew will, just this once, do something for him. To not follow Dad’s every order and do something for his brother. He gets another notification from *Just Harrison* . Andrew is not very secretive about peering over Caleb’s shoulder. Caleb snaps his laptop shut and stands, stepping over the couch to avoid having to squeeze past Andrew. He abandons his eldest sibling in the solarium, and searches the rest of the White House in hopes somewhere will be safe for him.

He finds no luck. Everywhere he turns, there's a staff person hunting him down, or a sibling, or his actual mother herself. He eventually finds himself sat on the floor of a bathroom, the door locked, and his arms tight around himself, basking in a moment of quiet and solitude. A moment away from his chaos. He breathes shaky breaths, unsure where the panic was coming from, what it was orbiting around. He felt like a black hole, beautifully destructive, and a means to an end.

Daily, Harrison would be sure to text Caleb, let him know he was thinking about him. Let Caleb know he was still there, even when they weren’t physically side-by-side. And daily, Caleb would text back with some form of romance, of love and adoration that Harrison has never seen before.

At night, Harrison would call him, but they rarely ever speak on the call. It, more often than not, was silent, just Caleb looking for motivation to finish his school work, someone to keep him on track. Harrison was tasked with monitoring the sounds of his keyboard clicks. If it had been too long, Harrison would murmur a soft reminder to get back onto task. He was usually too tired for much of a

conversation, but Harrison would stay up anyways, just in case. He couldn't help but sense the distance, feel every mile that separated them. But Caleb was unbothered. At least, he makes it seem like he is.

"I think you spoil me too much," Harrison murmurs over the phone one night, lost in a mass of blankets and pillows, his cat curled by his feet. "Because I have just about everything a person could need to be comfortable, but I will not be able to sleep properly until you're here again."

"Two more days," Caleb reassures, whispering due to his own exhaustion and secrecy. "And I'll be there for… four days?"

"Yes-- thank you for reminding me," Harrison yawns. "I need to get permission from Gran to have you and Eleanor stay in the castle. She'll say yes, but I need to do all the formalities to ensure I don't overstep or whatever."

"You sure you can handle four nights of me?" Caleb asks, teasing. "I think by night four, you might call it quits. Be so tired of me, you'll be calling Diya to fly me out early."

"I know. I can only put up with you for approximately however long it takes to-"

" *Harrison* ," Caleb laughs.

Harrison, despite being on an audio call and thousands of miles away, can just picture Caleb's expression. His head thrown back against his pillows, an arm around himself for protection, a grin that exposes all three dimples, his cheeks pink. It was his favorite look on Caleb. It's the one he wants to always see, the one he sees in magazines that makes him wonder how he didn't fall in love sooner.

In love , Harrison thinks. The word makes him nauseous. Love. Especially when attached to Caleb.

Love is… business. Love is political, and monetary, and for tax benefits. Love is for approval ratings and children to inherit the throne. Love is not a feeling. It's a chore.

Harrison can hear Caleb giggle though, little wheezes and hiccups interrupting his laughter, and he thinks that, perhaps, this is what people feel when they feel love. This is what people feel when they hold their partner's hand, or go on dates, or survive some tribulation together. They don't think of love as something programmed into

them. They don't see it as something on their to-do list. It's an emotion that swells in his sternum until he feels like he could pop.

He doesn't understand love. He never had it role modeled for him. His grandmother was in an arranged marriage for political benefits. She says she loved his grandfather, but she also says she loves Harrison. His father married twice, and apparently, the first time he was truly in love. But the second time was anything but. It was barely a partnership. His sisters have been single their entire lives. Every boyfriend Josephine had smelled like eggs or treated her like shit. Kate's single boyfriend she had was trash.

He doesn't know what love looks like, or how to feel it. He's not sure that this pain in his sternum is even love. But he only felt it with Caleb. Almost like butterflies in his stomach, but he wouldn't say the feeling was anything nervous. It was excitement, joy… love.

"Two days," Harrison murmurs finally. Caleb cracks a tired smile.

"Two more. Then you have me again," Caleb agrees softly. "I miss you."

Harrison felt everything in him swell. Did he read Harrison's mind? Does he know what Harrison is thinking about?

"I miss you too, love," Harrison hums back, buried into his blankets. Caleb smiles at the sound of a pet name Harrison has steadily begun calling him over the past few days. "When you're here, you'll come straight to me, and I think I will spend at least ten minutes just hugging you."

"Just hugging?" Caleb scoffs. "What are we? Middle schoolers?"

"C'mon. I miss your warmth," Harrison admits. "I would do just about anything to have you with me."

"Shut up," Caleb rolls his eyes, smiling to himself. "Clingy bastard. I'll be there soon."

"Not soon enough."

"Plenty soon enough," Caleb reassures. "I'll be sure to be extra annoying, just to make the next separation easier on you."

"How sweet," Harrison fake swoons. Caleb giggles more, sleepy and light.

For a moment, just a moment, Harrison feels normal. Childish. Like teenagers, flirting over the phone, hiding from Mum and Dad, not because he's closetted, but because relationships when you're fifteen are embarrassing. He's just a boy with a swelling crush that has taken over his mind. He's a kid falling in love for the first time, testing the waters, wondering if this is even what love felt like.

He's not, though. He is not a child. He's just an inexperienced, sheltered 23 year old man. He's hiding because he has to. But all that "love" stuff-- that's real. He's a kid falling in love for the first time, seeing if he will sink or float. He sure feels like he's floating.

Quiet consumed them after a while. Harrison could hear Caleb typing again. Harrison was under the impression he had already finished his school work for the night, feeling a little heavier, realizing that no time of Caleb's was his own. *Two days* Harrison reminds himself. Two days until it will be the two of them. Sometimes they will be stuck in a crowd, or a party, and sometimes they will hide, but even just being sat near him made Harrison feel lighter. Caleb has this forcefield of positivity. No matter how much Harrison wanted to stop falling in love, no matter how much Harrison wanted to hate him all those months ago, Caleb somehow doomed him to feel like Harrison might suffocate without him. Caleb wasn't just the sun, or the stars. He was the atmosphere, the oxygen, the very gravity that holds them to Earth. He is naturally, perfectly him.

"You've gone quiet," Caleb murmurs. "Are you asleep?"

"No," Harrison says back, smiling at the sound of his returned voice. "I figured you were busy. So I was letting you work."

"This stuff is bullshit. I'd rather talk to you," Caleb insists. "Distract me for a bit. Let me take a break."

"Wasn't it you who asked me to keep you on track?"

"Shut up," Caleb felt his face warm up. He closes his laptop quietly and sets it aside, tracing along his jawline, imagining Harrison's kisses.

"So what is it? You want me to shut up or talk?" Harrison teases. He listens to Caleb's silence, his ears ringing. "What do you want to talk about?" Caleb responds with some groaned sound that might have been I don't know in another universe. Really, it sounded something more like I-oh-uh? Harrison shook his head with a tired smile. "Wanna talk about the trip?"

“Maybe…”

Caleb will be here tomorrow , Harrison reminds himself.

He’s not sure why he’s significantly more nervous this time around. Caleb is the same person he was in the past four months of their interactions. The same person he spends all night on the phone with. The same person he texts at 6AM and 5PM EST every day. The only person who’s slept with him more than once.

He’s not sure why he’s nervous. They’ve met up a total of three times now. The week Caleb was in the UK for the funeral events, which felt like a lifetime ago now. That week was the week they became non-enemies, the week Harrison started looking at him and didn’t feel like he wanted to throw up. The few days Harrison was in the United States for the first time, where he kissed Caleb for the first time, in the Jackie Kennedy Rose Garden under a silent night sky. The same trip he slept with Caleb for the first time, the same trip he looked at Caleb and saw something other than a dull future for himself for the first time. The night in Sweden, only a couple weeks ago, seeing something in the once-enemy, something other than the falsified confidence put on for the cameras; seeing a person, a boy, hiding from life.

Every time Harrison sees Caleb, something in them changes. Maybe he’s scared of the outcome of this trip, scared of what will change next, of what will come from their next interaction. He wants them to succeed, but he fears what success even looks like for them. Is success a relationship that they can never have? Is success admitting to a love he’s not allowed to feel? Is success calling it quits before it goes wrong for them both?

He’s scared. He’ll admit it. He is a scared, cowardly man.

As always, when he feels this cowardice building in his gut, the tornado of thoughts that circle his mind, Harrison sits in his father’s office. It’s gone untouched over the four and a half months since Dad died. The only adjustments are the ones made by Harrison. Josephine and Kate don’t dare step foot inside. Mum isn’t interested to see what Dad made of his office. She isn’t interested in Dad at all. Never was. The only difference from four and a half months ago and today is the cleaning crew that routinely wipes the dust from his desk and makes sure the air is breathable.

Sometimes, when he sits here, in Dad’s worn leather chair, he can’t help but wonder what life would be like if Dad never remarried, if he

never lost his first wife. Maybe Dad would have actually had children with her eventually-- children he wanted, children he loved. Maybe Dad would have survived longer-- perhaps his sheer unhappiness only worsened his condition. And maybe Dad would have been a good man, and not one the history books write about as a bad guy.

Harrison feels heavy, knowing his blood was used to reign terror, bloodshed, genocide, and more. He feels disgusted by acts that were not his own, thoughts that never belonged to him. He feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility over his father's atrocities despite not being born until thirty years after they were committed. He doesn't want to own his heritage, but at the very same time… he misses his Dad.

He feels like an ass to admit it, too.

He didn't know his father. Not at all. But he missed him. He missed the childhood he never had, and he missed the fake smiles he would put on for the photographers on Fathers Day, and he missed the idea of having a father . He regrets a lot in his life, but he thinks, perhaps, one of his biggest regrets was never talking to him. Never trying to level with him. Never sinking to his level, for even a moment, in hopes of bonding. He regrets every hug he never got, every time he hid behind his mother's leg when Dad was around, and every time he never said *I love you* , even if Dad never said it, either.

Sitting in this stupid chair reminds Harrison that his father was real. He was something other than his faults. He was a man who picked at the leather to distract himself. He was a man who had a pen of every color on his desk. A man who constantly changed the date on the calendar-blocks on his desk. The date is permanently stuck at May 29th.

He doesn't remember May. He doesn't remember much of anything pre-Caleb, because there was nothing to remember. He has the occasional snapshot, the occasional argument, but it's all grey. Harrison thinks he just drifted for the past twenty three years, and then woke up on the day Dad died. He remembers that quite well.

And, like clockwork, he starts to wonder once again what Dad would think of Caleb. Wonders what he would say if he knew his son liked men, what he would think if he ever had to shake Caleb's hand. Dad liked the Chapmans-- at least, he liked Andrew Chapman Sr. Maybe that was enough of an answer to his question.

No, he would not have liked Caleb. And yes, Harrison is far better off without him. But it doesn't make the hole feel any less empty.

Chapter End Notes

Short one today, but I liked this one. Very existential, and a little angsty, but I wanted to include something a little more than JUST "they meet up, they are fluffy and sweet, they are smutty and steamy, they pout about leaving". I feel like they deserve to be a little more than just that. I hope that came across well in this chapter. Also, I had a lot of fun with the "meteorology / astronomy imagery" stuff. Meteorology and astronomy have been one of my special interests since I was in third grade.

As always, thanks for the support, and as always, leave comments / criticisms / drop your favorite line. i wanna hear it all. indulge my ego lmfao. have a good week, yall :)

Chapter 15: Jealousy, Jealousy

Chapter Summary

A long overdue conversation comes with unsatisfactory results.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harrison doesn't meet them at the airport like he wishes. Kate and Josephine both go, but Harrison was stuck in the castle with contractual meetings and a phone conference with a British Ambassador to France, someone he's been putting off a conference with since Dad died. It's one of Dad's many contacts that became his responsibility since his passing, and in all honesty, Harrison was not entirely fond of the job prospect. He's spent the past twenty three years drifting, waiting to either die or be something important. He's yet to do either.

He is sitting at his desk, legs curled onto the chair with him and watching the drizzle from the window as he works. His news app is in a frenzy from the press photos of Kate and Josephine picking up Caleb, Eleanor, and Annika at the airport. It's been a total of ten minutes, and already there are rumors that Caleb and Harrison had a falling out, and that Caleb and Annika were an "item". American tabloids have been calling them "the power couple of our dreams" and "soulmates".

To be fair, Harrison was less than pleased to see the photos, too. The Americans, deboarding the plane, all smiles. Caleb touching Annika's back, and at one point wrapping an arm around her shoulders, both grinning. It sits wrong, seeing him so close to her. Even if Harrison knew they weren't a couple, even if Harrison knew that eventually, things wouldn't work out, it bothered him nonetheless.

He tries to keep working.

There's a soft knock on his barely open doorway. Harrison hums in response, and the door shuts behind his visitor. Any of that tension, that annoyance from the photos, the fear of losing Caleb, dissipates. A set of arms slip around his body from behind, a face tucking into the crook of his neck. Harrison adjusts, smiling, tilting his head to make more room.

“Hi, love,” Harrison murmurs.

“Hi baby…” Caleb exhales into his skin. “Close the computer.”

He does as told, instantly putting the laptop away and standing from his desk. He takes Caleb into a proper hug, the very hug he promised two days ago. Arms wound around his neck, hands gentle against Caleb’s upper back and neck, feeling every inch of togetherness. Harrison took a deep breath of home, squeezing tighter.

“Your sisters are out with Annika and Ellie,” Caleb mumbles into Harrison’s neck, kissing his skin. “I’m all yours.”

“Yeah?” Harrison smiles. “All mine?”

“Completely yours.”

Harrison retracts slightly, tucking their foreheads together. Eyes rested shut, hands touching every available inch of Caleb’s body, Harrison feels complete comfort and safety. He wants this moment to last forever. Caleb keeps his eyes open, unable to look away from Harrison’s sweet, peaceful smile. He wants this moment tattooed on his soul, to constantly replay in his mind every time he feels less than happy. He wants this moment burned into his skin, to brand him with a forbidden adoration and, dammit, he’ll say it, *love* .

Not a word is spoken between them. They just share their breaths and feel complete. Harrison doesn’t feel that hole in his chest that he felt in his fathers office the other day. Caleb doesn’t feel like the destructive black hole he was only a few weeks prior. They are steady, and comfortable, and perfectly them.

“I told you. Ten minute hug,” Harrison mumbles. “I don’t think I’ll let go.”

“I’m okay with that.”

Harrison retracts only a couple centimeters, opening his eyes again and smiling, ghosting a hand over Caleb’s face. He ran a thumb over his jaw, his chin, his lower lip. Caleb instinctively presses his head into Harrison’s hand, into the one touch he never feels the need to hide from. He kisses the cup of Harrison’s palm.

“Three weeks felt like three months,” Caleb murmurs against Harrison’s hand. “I forgot how much my family annoys me after such a nice time with you.”

“Likewise,” Harrison chuckles, dragging his fingers through Caleb’s messy waves. For the first time, he notices a scar on Caleb’s forehead, just barely missing his eyebrow. “I never noticed this. Where’s it from?”

“Getting smacked in the face with a door,” Caleb chuckles, pulling free from Harrison’s hands and sinking down so he sat on the edge of Harrison’s bed. Harrison sat back down at his desk chair, rolling it closer to Caleb and holding out a hand. Their fingers lace together, resting on Caleb’s thigh. “I was running around with my brother and sister at my grandma’s house on the lake. I was running up onto the back porch after Andy, and Bridgette tripped me, so I went down right as Andy opened the screen door. Metal framing, straight to the face. Had to get a tetanus shot, because the door was rusted right where I hit my head.”

“How old were you?” Harrison asks with an amused smile. Caleb hesitates, searching his brain full of memories for an accurate age.

“Six or seven?” he guesses. “Got three stitches.”

“Of course you did,” Harrison chuckles. “What other fun stories do you have?”

“How much time you got?” Caleb cracks a smile. He turns over his arm, showing a few white speckled scars on his tricep. “Bridgette told me to hold a sparkler over my head *‘like the statue of liberty* ’. Burned the shit out of myself.” Harrison snickers. Caleb shows off another scar on his hand. “Punched a brick wall. Don’t ask.”

“A brick wall?” Harrison scoffs.

“I said don’t ask,” Caleb insists. “I got a couple on my legs from nasty falls. A lot on my knees from tripping up the stairs at Grandma’s house. The one on my cheek is from a bike accident in Long Beach. Lots of splinter scars-”

He keeps listing, pointing out the visible ones, and gesturing to the ones hidden by clothing. He’s marked by spots of childhood and memories of life everywhere. He tends to mention a lot of play time with his siblings gone wrong, a lot of falling, tripping, stumbling. Harrison is enamored with a life he’s never had. He wonders if he has any scars, considering his face, hands, legs. None come to mind. He wasn’t a very active child, wasn’t very playful.

“What about you? Surely you got something?” Caleb squeezes his

hand, sitting forward so he could get closer. Harrison is quiet, still letting his mind trace back every memory, every cut or bruise. There's not many.

"I have the little one on my head," Harrison finally recalls, trying to remember it's source. "I think it was… Christmas morning? I was waking up my Mum, and I fell off her bed and hit my head."

"I don't see a-" Caleb squints. Harrison sits forward, tracing his finger over the thinner patch on his eyebrow from a minor cut that got two stitches. Caleb follows Harrison's lead, dangerously close to Harrison's face, carefully touching the dip in his skin. "Oh my god. That's barely-- are you kidding? That's it?"

"That's it," Harrison shrugs, smiling softly. "Sheltered child."

"I need to get you out more," Caleb determines. "One of these days, I'll take you to Georgia. Show you where most of these came from?"

"You want me to get hurt?" Harrison teases.

"No, I get hurt because I'm a clutz. You'll be perfectly fine, Mister flawless, scarless prince charming, " Caleb teases, still eyeing the small dip in Harrison's skin, the only proof that Harrison existed before they started spending time together. Caleb realizes how little of a past Harrison can tell him about, how few stories he has. He was a blank slate of a man. "I'll get you some experiences. Don't worry."

"As long as I don't end up in a hospital, I'm interested," Harrison chuckles, his eyes darting between Caleb's.

His eyes are just stunning. He has a color palette that reminds Harrison of the Earth and all it's beauties. His type of eye pigmentation is called central heterochromia, Harrison recalls from his science lessons. Where the border around their pupils is a different color from the rest of the eye. His eyes are perfectly adorned with long eyelashes and a slight sheen of giddy excitement. Unlike their time in Sweden, his eyes are not bloodshot or tired. He is purely Caleb, unaffected by hypothetical weight holding him down.

"You haven't kissed me yet today."

"You haven't kissed me either," Caleb shrugs, smirking.

"You're supposed to kiss me. Not the other way around," Harrison insists. Caleb snickers.

“Once a prince, always a snob,” Caleb jokes. Harrison doesn’t entertain Caleb’s cockiness, doesn’t waver. He just sits there, leaning forward, their fingers laced between them, knees pressed together. “You’re spoiled. I think I might have to start waiting for a good *please* and *thank you* .”

“I could easily just take one for myself.”

“A royal doing something for themself? Sounds unlikely.”

“Shut up,” Harrison rolls his eyes.

“Make me.” This patronizing bastard . Harrison felt every inch of distance between them, every breath from Caleb against his face. Harrison’s heart was racing, like he was about to kiss Caleb for the very first time all over again. “Indulge me, dear. Just one little *please* .” Harrison’s breath hitched. He sucks in a breath, holding it captive in his throat. His attention flickers to Caleb’s mouth, the smirk pulling on his dimples on his right cheek.

“Please?” Harrison finally whispers.

“Atta boy,” Caleb chuckles, leaning forward and closing the distance.

He’s careful, fingers barely supporting Harrison’s jaw. It was the most simple kiss Harrison has ever experienced. There is very little special about this kiss in comparison to any other. It’s just a brief couple seconds, just soft lips, no tongue, no touches below the shoulder, other than the hand still carefully weighted in his. But it was easily the best kiss Harrison has ever received. It made Harrison regret every second he didn’t spend kissing Caleb, made him regret every moment they are apart. He wants to do this forever-- hold Caleb’s hand and kiss him in the quiet solitude of his bedroom. He would be happy if he died at this very moment. He would have died a happy man, who only lived barely two months of life. They have been the best two months he will ever experience, though.

Harrison’s breath shakes when Caleb pulls away, and he immediately retracts his prior statement. He will not die happy until he receives one more kiss. One more loving touch, one more sweet moment of happiness that stems from this damned American he used to despise.

“Come back,” Harrison breathily pleads.

“C’mere,” Caleb chuckles, carefully pulling on Harrison’s wrist. Harrison swiftly stood from his chair, standing between Caleb’s knees,

releasing his hand in exchange of winding an arm around his neck, his fingers weaving through the hair at the base of Caleb's skull. Caleb's head tilts upward, smiling softly. "Feel better?"

"One more. Please. One more please."

"Since you asked so kindly," Caleb teases, pulling his chin down and kissing him again, a hand sliding up Harrison's back, gently gliding along his spine. Harrison pushes forward more, Caleb snickering into the kiss. "Needy bastard."

"Shut the fuck up," Harrison mumbles back, taking a sharp breath as Caleb's hand rests on his hip. "Scoot back a little." Caleb complies, no longer on the very edge of Harrison's mattress, giving Harrison the ability to straddle Caleb's hips. Caleb laughs more. "Stop. Don't laugh at me."

"Miss me?" Caleb jeers, despite pulling Harrison's hips flush against his own, pulling gently on the waistband of Harrison's trousers. Harrison pressed his lips to Caleb's jaw, in that crook right below his ear, a place that sends shivers down Caleb's spine whenever Harrison finds it.

"I'm not sure how much time we have," Harrison murmurs against his skin, dragging his touch gently across Caleb's neck. Caleb instantly relaxed. "You wanna risk starting something we can't finish?"

"I'd be pissed if we can't," Caleb chuckles, a breathy exhale coming from his lips as Harrison kisses his jaw again. "Okay, maybe-"

Too late, Harrison's phone is ringing. Caleb lets out a dramatic groan as Harrison pulls away, pecking his lips one last time before getting up and going toward his desk to check his phone. It was his sister. Caleb stands, readjusting himself and stretching out and loosening all that tension he was building. He messes with his hair using a mirror in the corner of the room as Harrison takes the call.

"Hi Josie," Harrison answers, plopping down at his desk chair again.

"Hey, you got Chapman with you?" Josie asks.

" *Chapman* ," an American voice behind Josie scoffs. "It's Caleb, Joss. Loosen up."

"Yes, he's here," Harrison responds, choosing to ignore the sound of Annika's voice in the back. "I heard Annika. Having fun yet?"

“Yes, but we’re dying to go out and do something. I already have Kate and Eleanor on board. Wanna come with us?” she offers. Harrison is beyond tempted to say no. Beyond tempted to tell her he and Caleb were going to stay in, maybe tag along later. But he already sees Caleb gearing himself to go out, ready to go face their families.

“Yeah, we’ll meet you in ten,” Harrison offers. Caleb cracks a small smirk to himself in the mirror.

“I’ll be timing you,” Josephine threatens teasingly before hanging up.

“Ten minutes? I don’t think it will take us ten minutes to get ready-”

“Get your ass back over here and kiss me again. *Please* ,” he throws in the last part for added sass. Caleb shrugs to himself and gives into Harrison’s attitude, taking quick steps toward him and tackling him into another kiss, soaking up every second before they have to separate again, put on the same front they always do.

The girls’ idea of an outing ended up being the most ridiculous idea fathomable, in Harrison’s eyes. Caleb, on the other hand, was elated at the idea of making Harrison do anything that may take some form of coordination that he never learned. To be fair, Caleb wasn’t the most graceful on rollerskates, either, but it was fun nonetheless.

Kate, Josephine, and Annika alike all had pretty significant practice with ice skating, which mostly translated over, but somehow, Eleanor was actually the best out of all of them. The building was shut down entirely just for the five of them, and while it was a strange experience-- having an entire roller rink to themselves-- it was the most fun they’ve ever had.

It gave Harrison plenty of excuses to hold onto Caleb’s arm or grab his hand. It gave Caleb plenty of reasons to smile at Harrison like an idiot. No one noticed a damned thing. Not Eleanor, Kate, Josephine, or Annika. Not their staff. Not a soul. They were stuck in their own orbit, unsure of who was the sun, and who was the planets.

Diya leans against the wall, watching with a careful smile at the sight of the six having such fun in a way that was only natural for people their age. At one point, Eleanor had grabbed hold of Caleb’s hands, guiding him around with rambunctious giggles that sounded a little demonic and satanic. Caleb had Annika clinging to his waist for support, making a train of Americans that slowly grabbed and pulled the Brits with them.

They get lunch afterwards at the most low class diner possible. It was actually on purpose that they ate shitty food, wanting something that got the royals out of their comfort zone, and something that fit the theme of today: letting go. It's awful and greasy, but it felt like freedom.

"Did Caleb ever tell you the story from his Freshman year in high school-" Annika starts, leaning across the table toward Harrison specifically, an evil smile on her face that reminds Harrison of his own sadistic sisters who like to leak all his failures to get a reaction from others.

"Annie, don't you dare -" Caleb starts, grabbing her by the shoulder and pulling her back against his chest. She hugs his arm to her chest but continues with her sentence anyways.

"So he was on the football team-- American, not soccer," she corrects before Harrison's sisters ask. "And he had this girlfriend. What was her name… uh… Valerie?"

"Violet," Eleanor corrects, encouraging the chaos. Harrison flickers his eyes between Annika, still held hostage against Caleb's torso, and Caleb, who was a furious shade of pink, and trying to interrupt her speaking every few seconds to make it inaudible.

"Violet!" Annika exclaims. "Oh my God-- she was stunning too. Seriously. If they lasted, they would have had the most beautiful babies-"

"Annie ," Caleb groans. "Stop."

"Listen, you're a handsome dude, she was beautiful. It's part of the story," she shrugs. Harrison is unsure if he felt proud or nervous by the story Annika continued telling. "Anyways, she was beautiful . And Caleb over here was the fucking High School hunk . If he lasted through senior year, he would have won every superlative. So this created some massive tension, especially with him and the football team. Because no one could decide if they wanted to be him or fuck him, you know?"

"Sometimes both," Eleanor shrugs.

"Ellie Jean, will you please not say that?" Caleb grimaces. "If Dad heard any of this he would kill both of us, revive me, then kill me again."

“That’s no different from the regular day,” Annika waves off, sitting forward on her elbows again. Caleb still keeps his hand carefully on her back, mindless, like it was second nature to be touching her. Harrison’s stomach lurches. He didn’t like the story anymore, and he certainly was less than pleased by Annika’s very presence. “So, there was this massive fight about him being on the football team, and-”

The story drones on, and on, and on. Kate and Josephine are giggling hysterically, and Harrison is smiling, because he feels like he has to. Annika and Eleanor can’t hold back their laughter either, especially when Annika pulled out the high school photos. Caleb hides his blush-coated face in Annika’s shoulder when she shows them a photo from homecoming in his sophomore year of high school.

“Oh my Gosh,” Josephine coos. “You guys were so little…”

The photo is painfully adorable, like a spiked collar on a newborn kitten. Caleb, his hair a tad longer, and his smile far duller, cheek to cheek with Annika as she hugged him tight for the photos. They looked good-- no doubt. Annika was beautiful, with her blond waves and bright blue eyes, a red lipstick that most certainly would stain if she wasn’t careful. He was in a simple button down and slacks, and had the same face, just a few years younger. No scruff, no age to his eyes. Just a regular teenager, living his life.

The rain starts back up that afternoon, making them all retire indoors early. Harrison would be lying if he said he wasn’t elated. For the first time in forever, he wanted to go home. He wanted to hide himself away in a lavish castle, where they were all dispersed so far from one another, that there was no worry of someone overhearing the wrong thing. He wanted to hide behind closed doors, snuggle against Caleb’s chest, tracing the bones in his hand.

Turns out, the girls wanted to watch a movie.

They’re all crowded up together in a screening room. Kate and Josephine found plenty of throw blankets and pillows to settle in against, and the six of them all found somewhere comfortable to sit. Caleb wedges in between Annika and Harrison, head tipped toward Annika to rest on her shoulder. Mounds of blankets hid the way Caleb traced each of Harrison’s fingers with a gentle touch, carefully weaving their hands together like a woven blanket, like the very blanket that kept them safely hidden from the people they love most.

Harrison was still unsatisfied. He’s got that weird feeling in his gut,

seeing Annika rake her nails through Caleb's hair and snuggle up with him so casually. In another lifetime, maybe they would be the secret couple. Well-- maybe not. If Caleb and Annika were a couple, there would be no reason for it to be a secret. They are America's wet dream of a couple, son of the president, and daughter of one of President Chapmans most trusted allies. They go together like the statue of liberty and a bald eagle.

But Caleb isn't holding Annika's hand, Harrison reminds himself. Caleb is holding Harrison's. He's squeezing Harrison's hand every time something scary happens in the movie, and he is slowly sliding more and more into Harrison's space, slyly searching for every possible touch.

Caleb is not in love with Annika, Harrison insists to himself. *He's not in love with me either.* But that doesn't matter.

When the movies they watch are over, they turn in for bed. Harrison slips into his room, Caleb looking over his shoulder before following him in. Harrison carefully pulls the blinds shut and works at the buttons to his shirt, chin tipped up. Caleb slides his hands over Harrison's hips, pressing a kiss to the back of Harrison's neck.

"Hi love," Harrison murmurs through his exhaustion.

"Are we gonna just sleep tonight?" Caleb asks quietly. Harrison nods. "Okay. Let me change."

Harrison comes to the sudden realization of just how intimate this moment is. Them sharing a bed for the night. Not for the purpose of sex, only to conveniently sleep side by side, but just to *rest.* Not just a hotel room bed, not just a bed they will never see again after tomorrow. It's Harrison's bed. This is Harrison's room. Everything in this space is personal. Everything here is fragile and held close to Harrison's very essence. This is the root of his being.

He's seen Caleb's room before, but it wasn't personal. It wasn't a space made for him. It was a room Caleb resides in. A room he is just as comfortable in as he is with a hotel. It's not home, but it works.

This, though, is Harrison's home. There is no more home other than this. He's grown up in this bedroom. It was his nursery, and his toddler bedroom, his bedroom that was filled with any child's desires as a kid, his teenage haven. And now it's his adult abode, a place he's sharing with a man he loved more than he should.

It's weird, sharing his bed. It's different from sharing the hotel beds, dawned in white sheets and plush comforters. It was the same place he will sleep tomorrow night. The same place he will sleep when Caleb is back in America. The same place he will sleep for the rest of his life.

Caleb goes to the bathroom to brush his teeth. When he comes back, Harrison is already sitting in his bed, flicking through a notebook he had on his bedside table filled with his daily activities and stately affairs.

"Hey," Harrison sighs, holding an arm out. Caleb is hesitant to join him. Maybe he was feeling the shift, too.

Caleb clambered in, carefully slotting himself between Harrison's thighs, head rested on Harrison's chest. Harrison happily tucks the notebook away and wraps his arms around Caleb, kissing the top of his head and taking a deep breath.

There's a million things Harrison wants to say. A million things he can't say. He sits in this moment silently, letting the thoughts run through his mind. He wants to take advantage of this life while he has it.

Caleb looks up at him after a few minutes of peaceful quiet. He presses a sweet kiss to the corner of Harrison's mouth. Harrison leans into the touch, especially as it traced his jawline, then throat. His lips against the base of Harrison's throat made him see stars.

"What's up?" Harrison murmurs. "Hey."

"Hi," Caleb mumbles against his skin, his teeth just barely pulling on the skin at Harrison's collarbone. Harrison held his breath, pushing his body more toward Caleb, who was now gripping his waist and pressing Harrison deeper into the mattress. Harrison pushes on Caleb's shirt hem, pulling the shirt up and the waistband of his joggers lower on his hips. "Eager bastard."

"Mhm," Harrison nods, not having realized how much energy he had pent up over the hours of watching Annika and Caleb so close to each other.

"Trust me to not get us caught?" Caleb teases softly, pulling away. His knees were pressed into the mattress on either side of Harrison's hips, pinning Harrison to the bed, and a beautiful and wet bruise forming on Harrison's collarbone. "We're in your house."

“I trust you,” Harrison murmurs back, pulling on his waistband again to tug him closer again. “Door is locked?” Caleb nods. “I trust you,” he says again. This time, Caleb felt the weight of that statement.

What is “trust” to a man of few allies and friends? What is “trust” to a man who has experienced plenty of hurt and not nearly enough care? Trust is deep. Trust is easily broken. Trust can easily be replaced with another verb, and Caleb thinks it would have touched him the same exact way. For a moment, less than, he reconsiders everything he’s done for the past few months. For a moment, a flash, he regrets sinking into love, like an anchor, plunging in the ocean.

But honestly? That isn’t true.

Because love is the best feeling he’s ever felt, and he experiences it now more than ever before. Love has made him smile more than he thought possible. Love has motivated him toward a future he was unsure if he would ever see. And love has made him trust.

It’s a painful realization; Caleb is in love with Harrison. Helplessly so.

Their bodies are just natural together. Every movement is fluid. Harrison, reaching for his nightstand drawer, and Caleb, finding the best places to leave his tattooed affection. Harrison’s breathy moans, the most satisfied they have ever sounded, and Caleb’s sheer ecstasy, muffled by Harrison’s sweaty shoulder.

Every motion is smooth, like Caleb’s lips against Harrison’s neck, shoulder, sternum, ribs, pelvis, hips, thighs, hands— anywhere he can place them. Every motion is love, like Harrison’s pleas for more, and murmured assurances that Caleb was good, and perfect. And when they are nothing but sweaty bodies and open mouthed, breathless kisses, they are just as perfect, just as smooth, and fluid, and in love as they’ve ever been.

Harrison can see the scars now. His pointer and middle finger trace the lines, dips and bumps on Caleb’s thighs, knees, arms, every bleached white portion of skin from a memory of his life. Caleb keeps kissing him, like Harrison was air, like he was suffocating without him.

“Hey,” Harrison whispers, breathless, his body aching from the best time of his life. Caleb kisses his jaw instead, still insistent on marking Harrison as his. “Baby.”

“Love,” Caleb hums, making Harrison smile. They switched

nicknames. “What is it?”

When Harrison hesitated, Caleb knew exactly what would come from his mouth. His stomach flips, and he leaves one more kiss to the corner of Harrison’s mouth.

“I-I think I love you.”

“You think?” Caleb asks, voice more crackly then he intended. He’s just as scared, just as intimidated by a feeling they didn’t understand.

“No. I know,” Harrison corrects quietly. “I love you.”

“Yeah?” Caleb pulls back, barely an inch. Harrison’s eyes flicker to his. Please say it back. Please. “How do you know?”

“Because when I’m with you, I feel like I was meant for something,” Harrison admits quietly, head tucked onto his arm. “And… and when I think about the future, I want you there. No matter how hard it will be.”

Caleb frowns, his heart shattering.

“Because when I realized I was falling in love with you, it didn’t feel like falling. It felt more like… walking through a door and finding you on the other side. And while I’m scared of-of my family, the press, and the future, I’m… I love you enough to not care.”

“Harrison…” Caleb was aching. His nerves felt like they were on fire again. His brain was slamming against his skull, ready to ooze from his ears. He’s scared. More than scared. He’s helplessly terrified. Harrison is, too, waiting for a response.

“You don’t have to-“

“I love you too,” Caleb finally admits, his voice cracking in the middle. Harrison is quiet, unsure of what to say, feel, do. Caleb’s jaw chatters, sniffling weakly. Harrison presses their foreheads together. “I had no idea who the hell I was until you.”

“That’s not true,” Harrison smiles sadly. “You… are entirely up to you. I didn’t do anything to change that.”

The party was an easy set up. Kensington has hosted countless parties over the years, especially plenty of them for the royal’s birthdays. Their staff had, like magic, set up dozens of tables and hundreds of

chairs. The catering had cooked enough food to make the entire palace smell like delectable dishes. The party event planners had decorated the entry halls and ballroom to pristine beauty, nothing short of perfect for Josephine.

Everyone was expected to dress up to their absolute best. Perfect three piece suits, without a single wrinkle in so much as their underwear. The girls in floor length gowns that make even the least worthy of the guests look like princesses. Even the photographers were expected to be in their best attire.

Harrison would be lying if he said he was keeping his hands to himself. At every passing opportunity, he finds a way to touch Caleb's arm, back, leg, holding his hand under the table. Caleb smirks like a cocky bastard with every passing touch, enjoying every moment of Harrison feeding his ego, and instilling more confidence in him. This confidence is foreign for Caleb at any place that wasn't at Harrison's side. Something about being near Harrison made him feel capable, powerful, worthy .

They are telling stories in crowds, music making it difficult to hear one another. They're drinking wine and champagne like kings. 90% of the party is too drunk to know what day it is. Harrison and Caleb are careful to stay sober, drinking plenty of water between each drink. The last thing they need is to accidentally out themselves.

They stand in a small group with Caleb, Diya, Montgomery, and a couple guests. Caleb is putting on that confident smile and American noise that gets people laughing. It's ridiculously easy to make people like him when they're all drunk.

Annika slides up between them, apologizing to Harrison with a gentle hand on his elbow.

"Mind if I steal him? Ellie and I wanted him to tell a story," she hums. Harrison flickers his attention up at Caleb, his eyebrows raised. Caleb finishes off saying his piece with the guests before looking down at Annika. He smiles, a bright smile that seems a little too familiar. "C'mon. Ellie and I need you for a second."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Caleb insists, shooting Harrison a small smirk before following Annika across the room.

The group they were in disbanded. Harrison is left alone with Diya and Montgomery. It's a rather comfortable trio— two women that made Harrison feel safe, two people he is comfortable hanging out

with. They weren't necessarily friends , but they were friendly.

"This has been a good one," Montgomery comments to Diya, sipping her own champagne.

"You did good, Monty," Diya hums, tipping her glass toward Montgomery with a nod. "Never fail to impress me."

"Are you having fun, Harrison?" Montgomery leans forward to look at him. Her eyes follow Harrison's gaze across the room, locked onto Caleb. Caleb was laughing with his head thrown back, his drink discarded and an arm around Annika. Harrison gnaws on his cheek, shifting from foot to foot, unsure whether he should follow Caleb or not. "Earth to Harrison? Are you there?"

"Hm?" Harrison tilts his head up slightly and slowly peels his attention away and toward his and Caleb's managers. Diya and Montgomery share a smirk before chuckling under their breath together. "What?"

"Darling, do try to be more subtle," Diya says, shaking her head. "You're in public."

"What do you…" Harrison glances back at Caleb to see Annika now falling into his shoulder, hiding her giggles against his arm. "I'm not doing anything."

"Mhm," Montgomery nods, taking another swig. "Just like you're not the Prince."

"What are you insinuating?" Harrison shot his attention toward the women to his right again.

"Oh, honey, we're not insinuating anything. Consider it an evaluation. Perhaps an inference," Monty shrugs. "My advice, darling… try to show your jealousy a little less."

"I'm not-" Harrison began, but the women were giggling again. "What would I be jealous of?"

"Oh, Harry," Monty sighs. "Young love is very confusing, isn't it?"

With that, the two split off from him, leaving him stunned silent. He looks to Caleb again, finding him now just talking to Annika and Josephine. Harrison's heart leaps to his throat. He paces away, finding another guest to distract himself with, in hopes to prove something

to… to who?

Caleb? Annika? Monty and Diya?

…Himself?

He blinks the thoughts from his head and starts talking with some of the Danish guests. The Danish prince is rather enthusiastic in his conversation, looping Harrison in. His accent is thick and comes from the throat, but his English is rather pretty. He speaks mostly fluent English, though every few words he will stumble and substitute it with a Danish word in hopes someone else could translate. Harrison puzzle-pieces the conversation together and helps fill in where he knows the word.

But his eyes keep finding Caleb. No matter how hard he tries to look away. No matter how much he tries to distract himself. He always finds Caleb. And oftentimes, Caleb is looking back with the same gentle smile he always has.

Occasionally, there's a slow song that makes Harrison regret every moment of his life. He regrets being born a boy, and he regrets being gay, and he regrets being too cowardly to come out. He watches the party partner up with their respectful other halves, and sometimes, the girls would pair up to be silly. The first couple times, Annika danced with Josephine, or Eleanor, or Kate, and Harrison's sisters would pair up. He just hovered around the outskirts, avoiding cameras, and definitely avoiding any female that tried to make eye contact with him.

He stands against the back wall with the Danish prince and his little sister, wishing he would remember the damned kids' names. It might be Finn? Felix? Something starting with an F. Probably Felix. And for his sister, Harrison is 90% sure her name is Agnes. They complain together about the stupidity of slow dancing. All three of them were trained in the art of slow dancing over their years of ridiculous royal rules and teachings, but none of them were willing to use it. Eventually, Caleb joins them with another glass of wine, settling beside Harrison with a small smile.

"Eleanor ditched me for your sister," Caleb hums to Harrison, nudging him.

"Funny. My sisters ditched me for your sister and friend," Harrison responds casually, sipping his champagne. The Danish royalty slowly inch away from them, sensing the new conversation that they weren't

invited in. That, or they just didn't want to associate with the Chapman family. Harrison trains his eyes forward. "Were you gonna tell me that Diya and Monty knew?"

Caleb bites his cheek. His breath hitches, and he crosses his arms over himself.

"In my defense, last I heard, Montgomery was unaware," Caleb murmurs under his breath.

"But you knew Diya knew?" Harrison finally looks up at him, trying to not lash out, not get angry. He knew it came from a spot of fragility that was not Caleb's fault. A soft spot Caleb was not responsible for. But Harrison was upset nonetheless.

"Yes," Caleb nods once, swallowing the lump in his throat. Harrison takes a sharp breath and looks away.

"How long?"

"She told me she knew when we were in Sweden."

"When?"

"Before you came to my room," Caleb admits. Harrison nods. He should have guessed that. That's why Caleb was restless. "I didn't want to scare you. She promised she wouldn't tell anyone, that-that Monty had no idea-"

"Monty knows," Harrison mutters in response, scratching the underside of his jaw, tracking their managers across the room. "So either Diya lied and told her, or we aren't good enough at hiding it."

"I'll talk to Diya," Caleb insists. "I don't- I don't think she said anything. She's not… she's not like that."

"Then that means we have to be a little more careful," Harrison says decidedly. "Agreed?" Caleb nods once. "Good."

"You're being short with me," Caleb finally says. "Why are you pissed?"

"I'm not pissed."

"You are," Caleb turns to face him entirely. "You've been glaring at me all night. The day started and you were sweet and then the event started and it's like you can't stand the sight of me."

“That’s not true.”

“No?” Caleb presses. “Then what the hell is up with Felix?” So his name IS Felix. “Hm?”

“I have known Felix since I was an infant. Nothing is up with him.”

“Is that right?” Caleb cocks his head to the side. “So when I go hang out with Annika and Josephine again, you’re gonna be fine?”

“Of course I’ll be fine ,” Harrison insists. “Play it up all you want. Like I said, we’re being too obvious.” It killed Harrison to say it, but it’s true. They need to hide better.

“Fine,” Caleb shrugs. “I will.”

“Have fun,” Harrison nods curtly. Caleb shakes his head, rolling his eyes and walking away. Harrison looks down at his drink again and shakes it off. It’s fine.

The next slow song is almost an hour later. Harrison hasn’t spoken to Caleb since. If anything, he’s kind of avoiding him. Get distance. Take a breath from him. He would say a breath of fresh air, but really, the air feels poisoned without him.

He’s sure if anyone were to take a photo of him at this moment, he would look like a total freak. Eyes ablaze, glaring down a dancing pair on the floor, one of which is the first son of the United States, the other being the girl who had the confidence to ask him for a dance: Annika.

She was beautiful. Maybe that’s why Harrison was trembling at the fingertips, why he had chewed his cheek raw. She was absolutely beautiful. The media was feasting on the attractive pair. His blond hair catches the dim lighting just right. Her body in that dress, tea length, and feminine, and dainty, his hand on her waist, the other holding hers. Her nails were freshly manicured, the design matching her skirt pattern. Kitten heels that add just enough height that she would be at a perfect angle to kiss him if she so chooses.

He looked at her, smiling. Not in the way he smiles at Harrison, Harrison reminds himself. And yet, Caleb was still smiling.

Maybe those looks toward Harrison weren’t the ones of love and fondness that Harrison interpreted them as.

The song couldn't end fast enough. But the dance carried on for a second. Caleb began to laugh with her. Began to whisper in her ear. She giggled into his neck and spun under his hand like they were the only two people in the world. Harrison's jealousy flared, but he forces himself to remember: they can't do that together. They can't be caught being together.

He is seeking cover in the only way they can: false narratives.

When Annika finally split off, it was with a polite curtsey, teasing him. Caleb bows his head in return, a playful smile that resembles far closer to the one he gives Harrison. One that makes his eyes squinty, and shows off his pretty dimples.

Caleb returns to Diya, talking with a blushy smile, sipping down some wine as he does. Harrison sets his drink down and marches over, weaving through people and trying so damn hard to keep a straight face. He taps Caleb's elbow to alert him that he was there. Caleb looks at him and raises an eyebrow. Harrison doesn't react.

"A word, please?" Harrison requests. Caleb shrugs, gulping down more of his drink. "Now."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he rolls his eyes. "I'll be back in a sec, Di."

"No more than forty minutes or else I will send agents after you," Diya said in response, whispering.

"Fifty?"

"I'm not telling you when I start the timer," Diya responds, smirking. Harrison was already out of the ball room and halfway down the hall. Caleb looks both ways in an attempt to find him and sighs, seeing Harrison walk off speedily. He jogs to catch up, snagging Harrison's wrist. Harrison cranes out of the hold and keeps walking.

"What, are you pissed at me for doing exactly what you told me to do?" Caleb frowns. "Harrison."

"Left," Harrison says suddenly. Caleb furrows his eyebrows, glancing left. Harrison pushes him through a doorway. They were in a hidden stairwell, behind closed doors.

"I don't know why you're pissed. If it has to do with Annika-"

"Stop talking," Harrison demands, grabbing a fist full of his tie,

wrapping it around his knuckles, yanking Caleb down.

Caleb caught himself with his hand against a wall, other hand on Harrison's face, lips against lips, sharing every breath. Harrison slid his spare, trembling hand over Caleb's ribs, over his shirt, under the jacket. Caleb rolled his body into Harrison's touch without second thought. Caleb knows him blind. Caleb knew how to manipulate Harrison's body, how to lean into his touch, in the same ways he knows how to manipulate a car. Steady, safe, but when a collision is impending, a swift jerk out of harm's way. Into the arms of safety and life.

They break for air, mouths both open, centimeters apart.

"Tell me you love me," Harrison demands, voice shaken, trying to hide his fear with his anger.

"I love you," Caleb says, without second thoughts. Harrison pulls him in again, pulling his body closer, hips to hips, mouth to mouth again. Caleb carefully slid a hand up Harrison's arm, over the knuckles that gripped Caleb's tie so tightly. "I love you. So much. I love you."

"Promise?" Harrison asks in a quiet plea, hands trembling under the touch, breath uneven as it fans across Caleb's face. Caleb frowns, even more concerned now. His thumb drags along Harrison's cheek, eyes flickering between Harrison's.

"Come here," Caleb whispers, slowly pulling him in for a tight hug. Harrison takes it, adoring the pressure that encapsulates him, in need of that crushing love and comfort that he finds nowhere other than Caleb's embrace. " *My heart is so full of you, I can hardly call it my own,* " he reminds Harrison of that sweet little quote that was engraved in Harrison's mind, and doodled all over Harrison's notebooks. Caleb held a little tighter. "Yes, I…I promise, I love you. She's a friend of my sisters, someone I grew up with. Nothing more." Harrison presses his face into Caleb's shoulder, hands smoothing over his back. "Why don't you believe me?"

"I do," Harrison mumbles into Caleb's shoulder, pulling gently on his tie.

"No, you don't," Caleb responds back, retracting, Harrison winding arms around himself in protection. He's cold from the loss of touch. He's overly conscious of his solitude, of the eyes staring at him. Caleb glances around them, then back at Harrison. "I love you. *I love you* ." Harrison bites his cheek, leaning back against the stair bannister. "I

don't like Annika . I don't like any of the girls that ask me to dance, or ask me to go home with them, or offer to go out for a drink. I don't even like any of the other European boys. Not a single one of them. None of them will ever compare to you."

"What makes me any better than-"

"Because you're *you* ," Caleb shot back, hand on Harrison's hip. "Because you have those warm eyes and that pretty mouth and the heart of platinum, because gold is too weak to compare you to." Harrison's face fell. He looks up at his partner, the person he wanted more than words would ever allow. "I can't imagine a future without you. I think… I think of this cute little story book house. A small front garden. Plenty of houseplants. A cat." Harrison scoffs out a laugh. "I want to spend eternity on a couch in our living room, fighting over what movie to watch. And I want to go to bed at night and know that I get to be the last person you see. And I want to spend the rest of my life thinking about your body, and all it's little intricacies."

For some reason, this whispered truth, the promise of a future they can't have, hurt worse than Harrison's jealousy. He was scared. He was tired. He wanted normalcy.

Exhausted, Harrison and Caleb sink onto the stairs for a seat. Harrison rests his head against Caleb's shoulder, fingers sliding through Caleb's, over every digit, across his wrists, the palm of his hands, touching him so sweetly. Tracing the lines on his palms, Caleb watches with a blissful smile. Fuck the sex, and the kisses, and the I love you' s. He loves this the most. He wants this moment forever, stored in a shadow box, hung over his mantle.

"My father is rolling in his grave right now," Harrison says with a quiet laugh. Caleb almost laughs too. Almost. He decides not to, just smiling, trickling his fingers up Harrison's sharp spine, over his button down, but under his jacket. "What do you think he would have said if he knew his only son was gay, and having an affair with the son of the President of the United States."

"An affair," Caleb scoffs. "Who's your prior commitment? Are you hiding a wife from me?"

"Yeah, right, because I'm such a ladies man," Harrison chuckles. "I don't know. I almost…. I almost put this whole… monarchy stuff in place of that prior commitment deal. Gran is going to have my head if she ever finds out." Caleb nods simply. Harrison could see the slow

deflation. He slowly lifts Caleb's hand to his mouth, leaving a kiss to the center of his palm. Caleb rests his hand against Harrison's face, his eyes lacking in their previous energy and worship.

He knew they would be stuck like this. He knew they would never go public. But sometimes it was a painful reminder, knowing they are short lived. Knowing, eventually, Harrison will have to marry someone else; a woman. He has to maintain the lineage. Knowing Caleb will eventually find a person of his own that will look good for the magazine covers. Who knows— maybe Annika is that person. But he doesn't want her to be.

He ghosts his thumb along Harrison's cheekbone. Harrison presses another kiss to the muscle below Caleb's thumb, and then his thumb knuckle, keeping Caleb's hand for himself.

The midnight sex when no one was looking, the nudging knees, the smiles from across a room, that will have to suffice. They only have so much time before they will be forced to move on.

Caleb looks at his partner-- Harrison wasn't his boyfriend— they were intimate, and they kiss behind closed doors, and they flirt, and he's so painfully in love, but they aren't a couple. Though, Caleb just keeps thinking about how in love he is. How he wanted to be in love with Harrison forever.

They return to the dinner party almost an hour after. Caleb finds Diya first to make his presence known.

"Feel better?" She asks, looking down at her padfolio.

"Worse," Caleb admits softly, gaze following Harrison as he found some guests to mingle with. Diya's glower suddenly becomes a concerned frown.

"What do you-"

"It won't last," Caleb admits. "You were right."

"Did you two… split up?"

"Not yet," Caleb huffs, picking up another drink. She senses the finality to his statement and lets him be. She touches his arm, ever so gently, and leaves him to think.

Annika comes over with Caleb's sister, the three messing around and

giggling together through mildly tipsy conversation. Caleb tucks his arm around her waist to keep her on her feet. She slipped her hand in his back pocket. Caleb wondered if this is what his future looked like — political conventions, Harrison and him on opposite sides of the room with different lives, pretending theirs together never existed. Pretending Caleb didn't know the taste of Harrison's tongue, and Harrison didn't worship an American politician in the most lewd ways. Both putting on a straight face, in more ways than one.

That night, after the party disperses, and Caleb promises to check in with Diya, Caleb stays the night in the castle.

In reality, rather than movies or games or late night laughter, Harrison and Caleb spend it in a hot shower, Caleb's arms around his partner's waist, his face in Harrison's neck, nipping at bits of skin easily hidden by clothing. Caleb and Harrison were skin to skin, breaths timed together, heart beats synched in a beautiful rhythm. Water rains over their heads, properly washing Caleb clean of grabby hands from a girl he grew up with, and Harrison of a jealous rage he's never found himself in before.

Caleb considers proposing some more fun. Harrison does too. They only have so much time before they are a world apart again. But when they dried off, and Caleb sat on Harrison's bed, all he could think about doing was sleeping as long as possible.

Harrison and Caleb laid curled under the covers, rotating between being snuggled close and flipped away from one another.

In the morning, Caleb woke second, finding Harrison awake and sat at his desk with his laptop, sipping a coffee. Caleb props his head up on his hand, eyeing the curve to Harrison's bare shoulder, the way his porcelain skin looked so fragile, especially littered by tiny nips and marks on his collarbone and back. Like scuffed china. Though, Harrison was not damaged. He did not reduce in value. He was simply well loved.

Caleb slowly pushes himself upright, making himself known. Harrison glances over his shoulder and puts down his coffee and closes the laptop. Instantly, he crawls back into bed, a hand resting against Caleb's bare chest, and leaving a sweet kiss against his mouth.

"What's your agenda?" Harrison mumbles against his mouth. "When are you due with Diya?"

"Eleven," Caleb responds quietly. Harrison retracts enough to check

the time. He smiles, satisfied. “Do we have time?”

“Three and a half hours,” Harrison confirms. Caleb immediately parts his lips to allow Harrison’s tongue passage. Harrison’s leg presses between Caleb’s thighs, his thin, cold fingers sliding along Caleb’s stubble. Caleb’s nails rake up Harrison’s legs, clad in sweats that were a size too big on him. His fingers dip into Harrison’s waistband, using it to pull Harrison flat against him. “When do I see you next?”

“Halloween party?” Caleb whispers into Harrison’s mouth. “The thirty first. A cabin just outside of Augusta, Georgia. It’s not a political thing.”

“I have to be in London for my birthday dinner,” Harrison mumbles back. “But I can fly back mid-day… right?”

“Damn birthdays,” Caleb huffs, rolling his hips into Harrison’s palm as he slid a careful hand between their bodies, taking Caleb by pleasant surprise. “Sure. Couple drinks. We do a birthday breakfast, you take a flight home for whatever stupid shit you do here.”

“Deal,” Harrison nods rapidly. “Jesus fucking Christ take your pants off, dipshit, before I leave you to deal with this yourself.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Caleb rolls his eyes, carefully moving so he could get his flannel pants and briefs below his hips. Harrison crashes their mouths together, still barely touching him with gentle grazes from his fingers. Caleb reaches up, a hand gripping the back of Harrison’s neck. Harrison smirks, tipping his chin up.

“Go on. I like when you play rough,” Harrison teases. Caleb quirks an eyebrow, happily taking charge.

Harrison laughs as Caleb tossed him into the mattress, his back pressed into plush bedding and his head cradled by a plethora of pillows. He’s angelic, the sunlight filtered through the curtains. Caleb sees nothing short of a golden boy, pure perfection.

They make every minute of their three hours worth it, until they are sticky with sweat, dried tears, and maybe something else. They shower together, somehow gentler than they had last night. Caleb was careful to make sure not an inch of Harrison’s sore, red skin went untouched by gentle lavender soap, from his ass, to his hips, his back, and arms. Caleb leaves a careful kiss to one of his shoulder sockets.

“Sore anywhere?” Caleb whispers. Harrison nods, leaning back against

his chest. “Need me to-“

“It’s the good kind,” Harrison interrupts in a whisper. “The kind of sore that will keep me feeling full until Halloween.”

“Maybe October 30th. You think we can swing that?” Caleb asks with a small smile, carefully getting Harrison to turn. His wet hands wipe Harrison’s face, and Harrison smiles. Caleb kneads his fingers into Harrison’s neck and shoulders, watching him and his muscles melt under his touch. “Just so I can spend a night showing you Georgia. And we can watch some horror movies…”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Harrison promises. “You… have to meet Diya at your hotel room before you check out. So as much as I love seeing you naked, and as much as I really love your whole aftercare routine, get the hell out of my house.”

“Do I have to?” Caleb sighs, earning a laugh, Harrison kissing him again. “Okay. Okay. I get it. I’m going.”

Harrison finishes his shower while Caleb gets dressed and speaks to Diya over the phone. Harrison pulls on some briefs and finds a pair of slacks and a neutral button down from his closet. Every couple of moments he could hear Caleb chime in over the phone, his voice hushed and secretive.

Caleb, phone still pinned to his ear, comes to the closet to find Harrison fixing his collar around his throat.

“I know. I’m literally leaving now. I’m on my way, I’ll snag a muffin or something from Starbucks so Ellie won’t say anything,” Caleb insists, coming over to Harrison, dipping over Harrison’s shoulder to kiss his cheek. Harrison presses upwards into it and stops Caleb to sort him out and better hide a hickey on his shoulder. “I know. Diya.”

“I’ll make sure he gets there on time,” Harrison reassures her despite not hearing their conversation. Caleb mouths a thank you. “Okay. Out. I love you, be safe. Text me when you land in DC.”

“I will, love you too,” Caleb presses a quick kiss to Harrison’s mouth and strolls away. It somehow only gets harder, watching him leave.

Harrison had no plans for today. His plans were Caleb, and him, in his bed. It was their bodies, soft spoken words, and a good breakfast.

Harrison wanders the halls until he gets the text from Caleb that they

were boarding their plane. Harrison sent him one last s *afe travels!* Text. Caleb heart-reacts to the text, and then it's radio silence.

He sat with his sisters for lunch, and he hung out with Mum while he played some piano, and he found himself in Dad's office again… He sits at his chair gingerly, as if the leather would burn, and he fumbles through his drawers curiously.

Dad was a painfully boring man. Organized files, all labeled in a penmanship that was certainly an assistant's, and not his. Nothing interesting— not so much as a stick of gum. Harrison pulls out one last drawer and frowns at the sight.

Empty cigarette cartridges. Dozens of them. The last box, left on top, six cigarettes remained, as well as a plain black bic lighter.

Harrison has a less than fond memory of being 19, in University, and having his father catch him coming home from a party with a cigarette in his jacket. Not only was him being at a party a catastrophe, but *smoking* ? Dad, almost four years ago, backhanded him so hard, his face was pink, and Dad gave him a strict, " *never touch one of those things again. You stay home from here on* ,". Since then, any of Harrison's PPO's were tasked to make sure he would go straight to class then straight home. No friendly interactions in the halls. No exchanging phone numbers with cute exchange students, or staying late for a group project. He never saw another party, and hasn't smoked since.

He wasn't a smoker, per say. But he had one cigarette every couple of weeks. Maybe classes got stressful, or he was feeling down, or he was just in the right moment to stick one between his teeth, strike a match, and smoke one down half way. He's never finished one.

He considers yesterday's events, of the way the world somehow never fails to do him dirty. The way Caleb looked so natural, his hand on a girl's waist, his suit paired with her dress, his smile, no matter how fake or true. Caleb doesn't like Annika like that, but he likes Annika. She's a good disguise. A juicy story in a magazine. A pretty cover photo. Maybe Caleb and Harrison had a selling story, but not a good one. He will be torn to shreds. Both of them will.

He wonders what Caleb's college life is like. If he likes it, if he sees the party scene, if he's drank too much, smoked to the filter of a cigarette, slept with the wrong person.

Maybe Harrison is the wrong person.

He stole one of the six cigarettes in the carton, slipping it in his shirt pocket. He considered stealing the lighter too, but he decided against it. He settles back into the leather, calmer, deep in thought. He wonders how often his father did this; sat back in a dangerously comfortable chair, thinking about the cancerous demons in his pocket, watching out the window to a world he would never see. Not really.

Harrison is lucky. Incredibly so. But it's more complex than luck. He has the privilege and access to anything he wants, and yet, he isn't allowed to be human. He doesn't get to make childish mistakes. He doesn't get to be gay, or single, or sad. Any of those things are a stir in the media. Any of those things will get him disowned. And that's the end of the world for anyone, but with the entire world watching you ? It's… it's different. Sure, he's fucking the son of the United States, and yeah, he can spend his day lounged in a luxurious castle, but the moment he steps outside, his life is not his own.

It's a confusing battle, in his mind. Deciding whether he loves his life or despises it.

"You're doing that thing again," Kate whispers from the doorway. Harrison blinks a couple times, glancing at her, then looking away. "Where you hide yourself away in one of Dad's spots and suddenly turn into him. Like you don't know how to not be our father."

"I'm not like our father," Harrison says back coldly.

"If that were true, you would look me in the eye when you speak to me," Kate responds, equally as unremorseful. "I don't know what I've done to you, but clearly it must've been heinous if you've sunk so low."

"It's not you."

"Then what is it?" She presses. "Indulge me. I don't know… I- I don't know how to be your friend when you don't even let me be your sister."

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?" Kate fought. "That deep of a secret? Or have you done something wrong?"

"Both?" Harrison finally tears his gaze away from the partly cloudy England sky, away from the pigeons and robins. Kate seems shocked to have his undivided attention, to make eye contact with him. She

looks so much like Mum— really, most of them do— but she has Dad's scowl. "Neither? I'm… not sure."

"Are you in trouble?"

"Not yet."

"But you will be?" Kate assumes. Harrison bites his cheek. "Yes?"

"If anyone finds out," Harrison confirms.

"How much trouble?" She slowly inches further into the room, checking that she shut the door behind her. "Like… PR team trouble? Legal trouble? Ethics trouble?"

"Lets put it this way," Harrison clears his throat. "Gran will be sure I never see the inside of a castle again if she found out. I'd be lucky if I so much as received a farewell."

"Oh," Kate's face drops. She's looking at him, trying to read his mind, trying to see what happened in his head. It's an awkward silence. Harrison finally looks down at his hands. He traces the lines on his palms, similar to how Caleb did hours prior. " *Oh* ." When Harrison looks up again, he can see it. She understood. "How long have you…"

"Known?" Harrison asks. She nods. "A while. Maybe… ten years ago? I was twelve or thirteen-ish?"

"Oh," she blinks a couple times.

"You need to stop saying oh ," Harrison snaps. "I've never done this before."

"Done what?" She carefully sits in a chair across from Dad's desk. "Come out?" Harrison grimaces at the phrase. "Never? Not even Josie?"

"There are a total of two people in this entire world who know, and neither of them even live in this country," Harrison confirms.

"Three people," Kate responds. "Because now I know."

"No, you don't, because you're not allowed to know, and I made a deal with him that-"

"Hold on, him ?" Kate interrupts. Harrison goes quiet. "There's a guy?"

“Katherine,” Harrison says in a hissed whisper. She blushes but leans forward. “No. There's no guy. Leave me alone.”

“Who is it?” She whispers back. “Is he cute? Have I met him? Is it the Danish Prince?”

“Shut up, Kate,” Harrison pleads, feeling the tremble to his fingers, his rising heart rate. He takes a shaken breath. “Can you take something seriously? Just once? Let’s not make my problems into the butt of a joke?”

Silence overcame them again. Harrison checks his phone to see if he’s received a *landed :)* text yet. He hasn’t. It’s been enough time though. Eight hours. More than enough time for a five hour flight.

You make it home alright? Harrison asks him. He received a reply within the minute.

Yeah! Sorry, literally landed and immediately jumped in back to back meetings. We have some kinda gala coming up. Cant talk rn, but i’ll text you tonight?

Harrison doesn’t reply. He pinches the bridge of his nose and exhales. His head is pounding, and he can feel his blood pressure rising.

“Harrison… Hey, I’m sorry,” Kate stands, sitting on the arm of the leather chair and holding his shoulder. She rests her chin on top of his head, a similar act of loving comfort to their mother. Harrison doesn’t think anyone knows how to show love other than the three women closest to him. Everyone else is cold. Clinical. Experimenting. They treat love like a chore, like a job, rather than a feeling.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Harrison whispers so quietly, he’s afraid she didn’t hear him. Her hand holds his tight, and she hugs him around the shoulders. He rests his head against her, squeezing her hand in response.

“I won’t,” she murmurs back into his fluffed curls and waves. “I don’t… I’m not entirely sure what it’s like,” she pulls back, moving to stand in front of him, catching his direct eye contact again. “But I know how it feels being scrutinized for my quote-unquote ‘failings’. I don’t want that for you.” Harrison nods. His attention flickers across her face-- the deep bags under her eyes, the way a frown looked so natural on her, the way she carried her depression like a tattoo. Permanent. He felt that pang of pain in his chest from the first time he heard rumors of his sister's mental health problems. It was leaked to

the Daily Mail before he heard from his own mother. “You don’t have to tell me anything. But if you want to… I support you. And I love you.”

“I love you too,” Harrison murmurs back, puffing out a breath. “I’ll tell you eventually. A day when it doesn’t feel so sore.”

“Okay,” she feigns a smile. “You’re my big brother. I trust you and your decisions. Just be safe.”

“Get out of here,” Harrison rolls his eyes, smiling sadly. “I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“Yeah yeah,” she laughs. “Okay. Go back to your sulking. I have a meeting with someone from the British Heart Foundation.”

“Go,” Harrison waves her off. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

He’s not alone. Far from it. He has perhaps too many people who care. And yet, he feels the emptiness of this room all that much more.

Chapter End Notes

> This is.... a really long chapter for me. It took up 50 whole pages of my Google Doc for this, and over 10K words. So please enjoy. I worked hard on it lmfao.
>
> In the process of writing this chapter, I came to the realization that I kind of wanted to have some mode of communication about when the next chapter will be out and my writing process... so... might as well introduce myself. Hi, I'm hayl. my twitter is @/mellohayl. and if you have any interests in the books I've talked about in previous notes, you can find the link/summaries on my twitter account. They are Y/A scifi/fantasy novels (it's a duology) and it's entirely self-published and done entirely on my own, so I'm kind of proud of them :)
>
> I'm not sure when the next chapter will be out, but keep an eye on my twitter, I might post about it there if you're interested. i hope everyone has had a good week :) now, off to my midterms that i didn't study for, because i was too busy writing fanfiction. yikes.

Chapter 16: The Loneliest Party

Chapter Summary

When it rains, it pours.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The month of October is an odd one.

Annika's birthday rolls around on the first. She celebrates with the Chapman family in the White House while she's in DC. It wasn't one of those big birthday parties like Caleb, Danny, or Josephine had. Instead, it was all the siblings between the Chapman and Beattie kids, and Quinn, all hanging out in the game room. Anyone over the age of 18 spent it drinking to their heads, and anyone under the age of 18 spent it laughing at their drunken family members. Plenty of Instagram stories and posts come from the night; videos and photos of laughing friends that clung to one another like sloths to their tree. Caleb thought nothing of it… just a nice night with his closest friends, with his family, laughing, smiling, feeling like any other young adult. He was just a college student at a college party.

He's overrun by school work as he hits midterms. They fly by in a blink, despite being an endless black hole of stress that swallows Caleb and Quinn whole. He survives, but barely.

His texts between Harrison are fewer and far between, but they maintain their usual schedule of 6am and 5pm texts. The phone calls became shorter, quieter. Neither spoke of the building tension. Neither mention the uncomfortable feeling growing in their guts. Maybe it wasn't a shared feeling at all, Caleb fears. Maybe it was him, making mountains out of mole hills.

Harrison, Kate, and Josephine all get permission to come to Georgia for Halloween at the absolute last minute, with the assurance that Harrison will be back in London for his birthday. Caleb is stuck in the White House with an abundance of homework and meetings up until Halloween morning. Dad almost makes him stay home.

It's been three years since he was in Georgia. Part of him ached, being back in his home state, his home in Atlanta. Hell, he would even take a nice visit to his Grandparents in the panhandle if he could.

They would be at a lake house that he's only seen a handful of times throughout his life out in Augusta. It was similar to Grandma and Grandpa's lake house-- the only property for miles, lots of tree coverage, not too big or too small. But the hammock isn't there, and the dock off of this lake house doesn't have Grandpa's boat, the *Freedom Flyer*.

It's stupid to complain about. Boo-hoo, he's at a second lake house. How tragic. But being so close to home… it hurt a little more than it should.

He's actually late to his own party, thanks to a poorly-timed call from one of his professors. He sits in the car after Diya and Chris already stepped out, his Calculus professor scolding him for submitting yet another assignment two weeks late. He just murmurs soft apologies and promises to be better. The professor is unsure of what course of action to take after that. No professor wants to be the reason the son of the president doesn't succeed in college. The conversation hangs over his head, and once again, he is faced with the tragic demise of his future, looking anything but fruitful.

He's one of the last to show up, finding Annika first. He and Annika had matching costumes, her in her best Sandy costume while Caleb was wearing a black tee, black jeans, and leather jacket, calling himself Danny. It was almost funny, because he looked more like his little brother Danny than the character he was portraying.

"You know, you could have put in just a little more effort, and it would look like you tried," Annika hums.

"Yeah, yeah. You sound like my mother," Caleb pats her back. "I'm getting a drink."

"Your mother is a smart lady. I'll take that as a compliment," Annika calls over her shoulder. "Harrison is outside if you're looking for him."

His desire for a drink drops the instant he hears Annika say his name. He makes his way through crowds of people, wiggling outside onto the back porch. Sure enough, Harrison is there, a beer bottle touching his lips, surveying a game of beer pong, played between Quinn and one of Caleb and Annika's friends from high school, Malcolm.

"Hey," Caleb leans against the bannister next to him, elbows digging into the peeling wood, eyes tracing the night sky and the sea of heads in the yard.

“You’re late,” Harrison murmurs in response, checking his watch.

“And you’re not in costume,” Caleb shrugs. Harrison rolls his eyes, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. School has a chokehold on my life.”

“It’s fine,” Harrison sighs, glancing at him, then taking another drink. Caleb watches his chin tip up, the outline of his jaw beautifully sharp. Everything in him pulls toward Harrison. He wants to reach out, touch his back, his hip, his throat, kiss him until they’re nothing but themselves. “You can’t come after me too much about the costume thing. What are you supposed to be?”

“Grease lightning,” Caleb chuckles, running a hand over his face. “Annika is Sandy.”

“Really selling that story, aren’t you?” Harrison hums. Caleb goes quiet, narrowing his eyes at Harrison.

“What does that mean?”

“Means what I said. You’re committed to this story. I’m impressed.”

“You’re pissed at me still?” Caleb accuses.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it,” Caleb insists. Harrison rolls his eyes, standing up straight and taking a step to the side, a step away from Caleb. “Dude-”

“I’m getting another drink. You want one?” Harrison asks, raising an eyebrow, staring straight through Caleb, rather than at him. Caleb is at a loss for words, floundering for the right thing to say. He’s stuck in this loop of thoughts, but none of them are right. “No? ‘Kay.”

Caleb stands in stunned silence as Harrison walks away from him. He flickers his gaze between where Harrison just stood, just an arms reach away, to the door he disappeared behind. He’s not sure what he did wrong, or what happened to Harrison to make him pissed, but he couldn’t help but feel pure fear, standing there alone.

He can hear Quinn calling him to join a 2 vs. 2 for another round of beer pong, breaking him out of his own head. He gave in, sliding up to his best friend's side and using alcohol to serve as a distraction from whatever the hell was happening inside his head.

Annika ends up joining the other team. Annika, Caleb, and Malcolm

haven't hung out all together since three weeks before the election in 2016. They were all in Annika's basement with a slew of other kids they went to high school with, all discussing how quiet their parties will be with both Annika and Caleb out of state. It was almost like a "goodbye" party, he recalls. A crew of eight kids, drinking Annika's mom's shitty wine, eating a plethora of candy until their teeth hurt, and telling stories through teary eyes about their childhoods. The time Malcolm got his head stuck under a bleacher, and when Caleb's ex-girlfriend, then close friend, Zoey, got caught skipping school to hang out with Caleb. When Annika had a crush on Caleb in middle school, and when Annika's at-the-time boyfriend Zack broke his collarbone when on a bike ride with Caleb, Annika, and Malcolm. They ended that night with tipsy giggles, lots of crying, and tight hugs.

Caleb hasn't spoken to any of them besides Annika and occasionally Malcolm since. He hasn't checked up on Zoey. He doesn't know what happened when Annika and Zack broke up. He hasn't heard from Claire, or Leander, or Finch. He's fairly sure Claire deactivated her social media accounts. Leander and Finch apparently still live in the same neighborhood they all grew up in, according to Annika. Caleb is unsure if he's jealous or sad for them.

After a couple rounds of beer pong, Annika, Malcolm, and Caleb go for a walk along the lake shore. Annika decides to flop into the sand, holding her hand out to Caleb to follow her down. The three plant themselves there, listening to the soft trickle of the lake, the bullfrogs, and lots of cicadas. Caleb plants his head in Annika's lap, laid between her knees with her fingers running through his hair. Malcolm sits directly beside them, arms hooked around his legs.

"So what's next on your agenda?" Malcolm asks them quietly.

"Meetings," Annika states simply. "Dad wants me to start getting involved in politics."

"I thought you were doing journalism," Caleb furrows his eyebrows.

"You wanna tell me what news company would hire someone directly related to politicians?" Annika asks with a sad smile. "It's a dead dream. Plus, Dad fucking hates any news outlet out there. I'm sure I can be happy elsewhere."

"That's not fair though," Caleb frowns. "If you wanna do something, you should at least try. Your dad can't decide your life for you."

"You're one to talk," Annika rolls her eyes. Caleb is quiet. "I don't

know. If I get lucky, awesome. But… It's a balancing act. I don't want to ruin my relationship with my father over a job . It's not that important to me."

"You got a masters degree specifically for journalism," Caleb argues.

"And it was a mistake. That happens, Caleb. People fuck up their lives and pay the consequences later," she insists. "I don't know. I'm sure Malcolm has his life together. Right?"

"Yeah, right," Malcolm scoffs.

"Oh, come on, " Annika rolls her eyes. "You're getting married."

"You are?" Caleb shot up sharply, looking at Malcolm incredulously. "Since when? To who?"

"I proposed, like, two months ago. Claire had it all over her instagram, dude," Malcolm chuckles. Caleb is quiet, looking between Annika and Malcolm, waiting for them to announce it was a prank. "You remember Claire. Don't even pretend."

"I thought… didn't she go off of social media?" Caleb asks, looking at Annika. They're quiet. "I tried to DM her on Instagram like… a year ago. And she was gone."

"What? No," Malcolm smiles, pulling up Claire's instagram page. Sure enough, there she is. She looked beautiful, and stunningly happy in the photo. She's improved in her makeup skills since high school, no longer using copious amounts of contour that was too dark for her skin. Her smile looks genuine. She's happier. "That's the ring."

"That's… damn. That's huge," Caleb cracks a sad smile. He glances at the username. @ *clairemahoney* . While Malcolm and Annika discuss the wedding plans, Caleb types the username into the search bar.

Nothing pops up.

Oh.

Okay.

Quietly, while still being sat there, he checks everyone else's accounts, too. Annika and Malcolm still have him as a mutual. He checks Leander next… to no avail. Zack doesn't pop up. Finch does, but when he checks, he sees that Finch isn't following him anymore. His final

person he tries is Zoey.

Sure enough, her account doesn't come up.

It's a sickening realization. Half of his friend group from high school, half of the people who have ever given a shit about him, blocked him. Finch unfollowed him. All he still has is Annika and Malcolm…

He looks back up to watch Malcolm gush about the wedding plans-- the save the dates already went out, apparently. They're going to be at a vineyard in Virginia-- Caleb was unaware Malcolm left Georgia in the first place. Hell, he had no idea Malcolm and Claire were even together. It was a really big wedding-- Claire's parents were paying for the entire thing. A guest list of two hundred people. Annika was a bridesmaid…

Not once does Malcolm so much as look at Caleb during the conversation. He knows better than to ask about his save the date card. He didn't get one.

Fair enough.

The conversation drifts from wedding-talk to relationship drama. Annika tells Malcolm about a boy she's seeing, but everything she says is vague. Caleb can't help but feel like she didn't want him specifically to be part of the conversation. Or maybe he was in his head… maybe he was being dramatic, and the save the date is somewhere in his mail piles at home, and Annika just didn't want to jinx herself or a budding relationship.

He didn't feel so great.

His head is pounding, circling around the scolding from his professor, and Harrison's sharp tongue, and the idea that the people he considered his family wanted nothing to do with him. His own family is a nightmare. Even at a party that he planned, he is the loneliest person there.

It's almost an hour worth of them talking before Malcolm says he wanted to go hang out with a couple of other people around. He and Annika both leave Caleb at the shore, sitting alone with nothing but a barely-there current, the moon, and his thoughts.

Harrison spent most of the evening trying to get out of his own head. He drinks more than he should. He mingles with people he typically wouldn't. Him and Quinn spend a good two hours just talking about

whatever their tipsy minds can invent. Quinn must have spent thirty minutes alone talking about *Pokemon* . Harrison didn't mind.

He hangs out with his sisters, who seem to be having plenty of fun. Josephine eventually found Annika, who was with a guy that looked to be about their age, the two laughing and talking in a crowd. Harrison slides up with Annika, earning a bright smile and a loud " hey stranger!" . She looks beautiful in her Sandy costume. Her blond hair was done perfectly to match the style of Grease , her body being a model's Caleb-- tall, thin, well accented by her skin-tight jeans and off the shoulder shirt. Bright red lipstick that matched her heels.

"Have you seen Caleb?" Harrison asks over the noise.

"Yeah, not for, like, half an hour though," she calls back. "The three of us were hangin' on the lake. Figured he ran to you when we left."

"I haven't seen him since he got here," Harrison says back. Annika glances at him, eyebrows furrowed, then tries to look over everyone else's heads in an attempt to find him. She turns to her friend. "Mac? Have you seen Caleb?"

"Barely spoken to him," Malcolm shrugs. "How should I know?"

"Don't be an ass. He's our friend," Annika rolls her eyes.

" *Your friend* ," Malcolm corrects. Harrison felt his stomach twist uncomfortably. Annika shakes her head, huffing, turning back to Harrison. She shrugs and returns to her prior conversation with Josephine. Harrison looks between Annika and "Mac". He caught Malcolm's eye and glares. The stranger blinks a couple times and immediately looks away.

Harrison tries to find Quinn again, assuming that, at the very least, he will find the two glued to each other's sides again. No luck. Harrison scours the house, top to bottom, and even tries calling his cell. No luck.

Caleb stays there, alone at the shore for the remainder of the party. He stays there until the music dies down, until most of the people flood out, and just the clean-up is left. Every couple of minutes, he would hear someone call out goodbyes to their friends-- people Caleb has known since childhood, and people he goes to school with now, and people Caleb has worked with since going to the White House. People who say loud and giggling goodbyes to others on the shore, but entirely overlook him. Caleb doesn't just feel invisible. He *is* invisible.

When the music gets cut entirely, Caleb checks his phone. He has two missed calls from Harrison from a couple hours ago, and a text from thirty minutes ago saying *where are you?* Caleb pushes himself upright, brushing the sand off his pants and walking down the dock and planting himself there, instead. He leans his back up against a post, eyes falling shut. Every few minutes, he'll skim his fingers over the water that sat just a couple of inches below the dock.

"You know, I've been looking for you for about five hours now," Harrison announces as he walks down the dock. "My sisters have already left for the night. Hell, even Annika has left for the night. I think the only people still here is Quinn, who has also been looking for you for lord knows how long -"

"I'm sorry," Caleb responds quietly, his voice barely a whisper. Harrison goes still, standing directly beside where Caleb sat. "For whatever I did to upset you. I… I don't want to be a bother-"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know what I did," Caleb says, opening his eyes and looking up at Harrison. "I'm not sure what it was that… that made you upset. And if you tell me, I can fix it. But if you don't, I want you to still know that I'm sorry. The last thing I want is to be a burden on you."

"How much have you had to drink?"

"Barely anything," Caleb shrugs, looking back toward the lake and taking a breath. "The equivalent of maybe two beers when I first got here." Harrison shifts his footing, glancing between Caleb, and the lake, and over his shoulder where Diya and Quinn were cleaning up some of the mess. Harrison sends Quinn a text. *Found him* . "Wanna sit?"

"Yeah," Harrison gave in, slowly sitting on the dock beside him, knees pulled up. Without any hesitation, without fear, Harrison takes one of Caleb's hands, squeezing it gently. Caleb directs his attention to their interlaced fingers, biting his cheek. "What happened?"

"Nothing I didn't already know," Caleb shrugs. "I'll get over it."

"Malcolm?" Harrison guesses. Caleb takes a breath and looks away. Harrison leans into Caleb's shoulder, kissing to curve to the joint over his sleeve. He leaves his face tucked against Caleb's arm, feeling Caleb's grip on his hand tighten.

“Did he say something?” Caleb assumes.

“Enough,” Harrison nods. “Who was he? Before today?”

“Childhood best friend,” Caleb admits with a whisper. “One of the kids in my friend group. I considered him family, y’know?” Harrison didn’t know. That was part of the problem. He didn’t understand that side of things at all. “I wouldn’t have survived my teenage years without them, but none of them want anything to do with me as adults.”

“I’m sorry,” Harrison murmurs. Caleb nods.

“I’ll get over it,” Caleb shrugs Harrison off, letting go of his hand. “We all lose everyone eventually. Part of life.” Caleb pulls his arms to his chest, skimming his fingers over his lower lip, knees rocking as he tries to self-regulate. Harrison watches, his heart sinking. He didn’t want to do this today. He didn’t want to make today any worse for Caleb. But if not now… when?

“No, I’m sorry,” Harrison says again. Caleb stiffens, looking away from him, as far as he can in the opposite direction. “I should talk to you like an adult when I have an issue. And it’s not fair that I haven’t been doing that.”

“Harrison-” Caleb interrupts.

“We’re not going in the right direction,” Harrison says finally, watching Caleb closely. He doesn’t react. “We… we really have to figure out what the hell we’re doing.”

“You sure you want to talk about this now?” Caleb asks, hoping Harrison will change his mind.

“I don’t want to talk about it at all,” Harrison admits in a whisper. “But I’d rather do it in person than over text… wouldn’t you?”

It takes a moment, but eventually, Caleb nods. Harrison is unsure if Caleb is agreeing for Harrison’s sake or his own. Harrison carefully moves so he’s sat against the post directly across from Caleb, hands folded in his lap. Caleb comes to a sickening realization of how this conversation will end.

“I told you I loved you,” Harrison says quietly. Caleb takes a shaky breath. He rehearsed this. “About a month and a half ago.”

“You did.”

“And it’s true,” Harrison smiles. Kind of. His lips turn upwards, but his eyes are glassy, and his smile doesn’t last. It quivers. “I love you. Perhaps more than I should. Or… I guess, definitely more than I should. And I went into this thinking… yeah. We can hide. We can be quiet about it, and no one will know, and one day we will grow past this. And I thought… I would never fall in love. Not with you. Not with anyone. Because I’m not someone who should fall in love. I’m… I’m not capable of it.”

“Harry… That’s not true.”

“And I lived in this false reality that… I would be able to keep you as long as I wanted. I would be able to… text you daily, and call you whenever, and I would feel this ache whenever we were apart, and that nothing more would come of it. But then I… I realized I loved you. And I realized... I loved you quicker than I should have.”

“Past tense?” Caleb whispers back, feeling his heart, soul, and everything in between drain straight into the lake, swallowed whole by a vortex in the center of it. Loved. Not love.

“Kate asked me, shortly after you left, what was going on. And it killed me to not tell her,” Harrison admits. “I came out to her. But I couldn’t tell her about us, knowing how catastrophic it will end if I do. And I-” Harrison’s voice stops. He’s stuck looking at Caleb, at the tremble to his hands, at the disbelieving eyes, and the chattering jaw, and wet cheeks. “I don’t want that. For me. For you. I don’t want us to get hurt over something… optional.”

Optional . Like a survey. Harrison has choices. Harrison can just… choose to not be in love anymore. Is that really how it works?

“I don’t want to get too complicated,” Harrison finally says. “Speak. Please.”

“I… I don’t care how complicated it gets-”

“That’s not the point, Caleb-”

“Then what is the point?” Caleb finally gave in, voice breaking. Harrison can’t look him in the eye. He refuses. “ *Harrison* .”

“I still love you, I just… I think we… we need to quit while we’re ahead. It will only hurt you more in the future, and-”

“Why are you acting like this is only about me?” Caleb asks. “I-I don’t get it. I don’t. You still love me. And you don’t want this to hurt me. And you’re upset with me for being-being friends with Annika when you wanted me to cover for us-”

“Love-”

“Don’t,” Caleb interrupts. “Please. Just- Just don’t. Don’t do that.” Harrison nods once. Caleb looks out onto the lake again, swiping his hand across his face. Harrison is unsure if he was rubbing his eyes or wiping his tears. Perhaps both.

Harrison wanted to reach out and hold his hand again. Wanted to do this at any other time. He didn’t want to ruin Halloween, or his own birthday, and he definitely didn’t want to drop this on Caleb the same day he discovers he lost all his friends, too. He didn’t want to be an added stress-- that was the entire point of this. He wants this to be easier on him.

Midnight strikes. Caleb heard his phone buzz with his calendar app notification. He glances at it. Sure enough, in all capital letters, with six exclamation points… *IT'S HARRISON’S BIRTHDAY!!!!!!*

Caleb sniffles again.

“Happy birthday Harrison,” he says, so quietly Harrison barely heard it.

Three months ago, they were in a total opposite position. It was Harrison’s whispered *happy birthday* that made Caleb give up everything, made him sacrifice whatever future he might or might not have had, and kiss Harrison. He made a decision that would be both the best and worst decision of his entire life. He has never regretted that moment more. Perhaps, if they stayed as enemies, if Caleb tried to hate Harrison a little more, they would never get to this point.

Harrison doesn’t want to leave him. He doesn’t want to let go. “ *I want to show you Atlanta”* Caleb had said what feels like years ago, but in reality, was only a month. “ *I think you might like it there* .”

This isn’t quite Atlanta, but it was as close to home that Caleb has been in a while. Harrison starts to reach, his hand just barely grazing Caleb’s knee.

Way out in the distance, a shotgun fires. It’s miles away, barely an echo from where they sit. It’s hunting season in this part of Georgia.

Caleb flinches, sucking in a sharp breath and pulling himself as far from Harrison as he can get. Harrison is unsure if Caleb flinched from the gunshot or him.

“Hey, you’ve been hiding here all night?” Quinn asks, approaching the end of the dock. “You good buddy?”

“Yeah,” Caleb sniffles, coughing into his elbow to cover the pure agony in his voice. “Drank too much tonight.”

“Let’s get you to bed,” Quinn offers, frowning. He glances at Harrison with his eyebrows raised. Harrison averts his eyes. “C’mere. I gotcha. Let’s turn in.”

Chapter End Notes

> Posted this on Twitter, but here's the songs I listened to when writing this chapter, just to get you in the right mindset:
>
> Happier by Olivia Rodrigo
> The Wisp Sings by Winter Aid
> The Night We Met by Lord Huron
> A Soulmate Who Wasnt Meant To Be by Jess Benko
> All I Want by Kodaline
> Talking to the Moon by Bruno Mars
> Place in Me by Luke Hemmings
>
> Anyways, yeah. I planned on having this out yesterday, but I had a bit of a bad health day (thank you, chronic disabilities. we appreciate it). I guess it was a blessing in disguise, because what I was writing before this was actual flaming garbage. Like, entirely dialogue, no prose whatsoever. So if you thought THIS chapter was dialogue heavy, just be grateful that I didn't go through with my prior idea.
>
> happy saturday friends! or, I guess, after this chapter, sad saturday, friends!

Chapter 17: My Sun

Chapter Summary

> The sun in Dad's sky, Harrison realizes just how much his father cared. Spoiler: it's not a lot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harrison has had plenty of miserable birthdays. Twenty five of them, to be exact. He doesn't remember many of them, if he's honest, but he knows they all sucked. He was no stranger to misery.

He thinks the first birthday he does remember is his eighth birthday. It was spent in the hospital. Dad had collapsed in the living room out of the blue. He was yelling at Harrison prior to fainting-- Harrison doesn't remember what he did wrong, he just remembers he was crying long before the EMS personnel arrived, he was scared long before Dad hit the floor.

The first half of his eighth birthday was spent being scolded by his father, and the second half was spent in the hospital with Josephine while Mum and Gran both tended to his father. He's not sure where Kate was… She might have been too young to be waiting with them, perhaps. Josephine hugged Harrison around the shoulders, whispering it would be okay, that Dad would be okay, that they would go home and eat cake soon. Harrison couldn't help but feel like it was his fault that they were there. When they went home two days later with a cancer diagnosis and a weak father, Dad blamed him too.

He remembers his thirteenth birthday, too. He was out with friends, and his family summoned him home for a charity event held under his name. He sat still, smiled at the guests, and nodded along with each passing speech. He looked dapper in his suit, but really, he just wanted to put on his football gear and go to the fields with his friends and kick around a ball. He wanted to be a thirteen year old boy who could get into trouble, who would blow out candles on his cake, and maybe get a couple stupid gifts.

His sixteenth birthday was one of the only one's he may have come close to enjoying. He was horrifically drunk throughout the entire thing, and he thinks he made out with every person in the party. He

knows he slept with one of them, too. He was reckless, and stupid, and Dad tore him a new one when he came home hungover and with a hickey. He was dragged to church and practically stuffed into a confession booth then and there.

He turns twenty five today, and within the very first minute, he is miserable. Caleb's tear stricken face, the breaks in his voice, the way Quinn guides him away… Harrison hates every second of it.

He arrives home in London close to noon. He's heavy with jetlag, exhaustion, and a little bit of a hangover, but he doesn't let it phase him. He texts Caleb a couple times in hopes to salvage any attempt at a friendship. He doesn't want to cut ties entirely. Being around Caleb is the closest Harrison has ever felt to human, the closest he's ever been to a real friendship.

He's immediately thrusted into a meeting with his grandmother. Something about a press event at Oxford next week. He nods along and quietly agrees to whatever she asks, lacking any energy. He couldn't care for much of anything right now. He looks at her with hopeful eyes toward the end of the meeting… Maybe, this year, she'll remember. Maybe, this year, she'll care.

She dismisses him after the meeting without a second look.

He goes back to Kensington. Paparazzi spotted him several times on the way home. By the time he arrives in the palace, it's already published. B *ad Birthday-- Prince Harrison spotted looking miserable on his birthday afternoon* . It's an entire article dissecting why he looks sad, and what might have happened. Speculation about secret romance, about a sour meeting with his grandmother, about loneliness, and Caleb. Technically, none of it was wrong, but none of it was quite right, either.

He doesn't even fight the urge this time. He goes to Dad's office and sits in his chair. It's become a space he has grown too comfortable in. Never has he felt like he owned his heritage, never has he wanted to claim his father, but it's almost unavoidable here. He feels like he embodies his father every time he stands in this room, every time he sits at his desk, touches the worn leather, smells old smoke and dust.

Harrison's eyes caught sight of a file sat at the bottom of a pile of paperwork. It's a manila folder, labeled *HHDCK* . It was Dad's chicken scratch.

His breath shook, carefully sliding it out from the bottom of the pile.

It's a thicker file than he thought. Carefully, he lays it flat on the desk. He almost doesn't open it. Almost wants to forget he ever saw it in the first place.

He cracks it open. Inside the manila folder sits a couple of papers--legal documents, and basic information. But under those couple pieces of paper sits a spiral notebook. Harrison pulls it out, eyeing the door, then the window, as if expecting James Bond himself to swing through the window and steal the notebook away. It was a hidden treasure, not meant for Harrison's eyes. It must be.

He flicks open the first page.

It's dated in the top corner. October 23rd, 1996 . Below that, on all thirty four lines, a slew of names.

Harrison David Henry

Henry David Charles

William David Henry

William Edward David

Arthur Charles

The list goes on. At the very bottom, in all capital letters, HARRISON HENRY DAVID CHARLES KENSINGTON. Harrison swallows the lump in his throat, turning the page. The date at the top is November 1st, 1996. His birthdate. Just like that other dumb sheet of notes from forever ago, there's a lighthouse drawn onto the lined paper. This one is bigger, more shaded, more detailed. Below the drawing, in Dad's best attempt at neat writing ' *let the light guide you, and the sea call to you* .'

Just as quickly as he grabbed it, he shuts the notebook and pushes it away from him. His breath is caught at the base of his throat. He's being suffocated by fear, pain, and exhaustion. Holding his breath, he hopes the file will just disappear, not leaving any trace of a father, of a parent who might have cared even slightly about his son.

He grabs the notebook again and goes to page three.

To my Harrison, my first son, my light. My sun, if you will-

Harrison almost vomits. Nausea consumes him. *My sun,* his father

wrote twenty-three years ago. A nickname he hasn't heard since he was in primary school, written onto a napkin from Madame Montgomery. She wrote something like *have a lovely day, my sun . continue to shine just as bright, no matter the rain.*

His breath shakes, and he continues to read.

I have not done much good in my life. Plenty of bad, much to repent, and more to regret. Some of the many failures include staying in this dreaded family as long as I have. Marrying your mother. Having your sister. It's all been mistakes that I will never be able to correct.

I'm not sure when you will read this letter. Perhaps I will gift you all my letters on your eighteenth birthday. Or maybe, I will give them to you before I pass. Maybe I will hide them from you forever. An old man will forget the little details in due time. You, my sun, are among them.

You are small, your mother tells me. Smaller than Josephine was. Smaller than any of your cousins were. Only six pounds even. Not very long, either. Your mother says you have brown hair. It's a miracle you didn't adopt her strawberry blond. Her Scottish heritage is not one your gran is very thrilled with. Better her than another Ukranian woman.

I am not sure when I will meet you, my sun. I have been busy with meetings all day. And, if I am being honest, I haven't wanted to leave my office regardless. I am far too old to be having a baby, far too old to be living the life of a twenty year old. My time has come and gone for parenting. I am sure you will understand. One day, you will.

I am nearly fifty years old, and children have never been my forte. You are a gift to all others. A gift to your mother, your grandmother, your sister. The moon in their sky that guides the tides, and that which everyone cannot help but watch in admiration. You have held the world captive from the first breath. You will make for a wonderful King, I presume.

Perhaps I will visit Euphemia tomorrow. You as well, of course. After she has had adequate time to recover, and you are less fresh. I would hate for you to bond with a man you will never see, a parent who will never be there. It is an unpleasant feeling, my boy. Consider it mercy.

With regret, your father,

Prince Charles of Edinburgh.

Harrison does not cry. He doesn't think about the letter, or the lump in his throat. He can just envision his father, sitting in this very spot,

penning down his thoughts of carelessness, his undesired family, the way he dreaded his own son. *My Sun* Dad had called him. But he didn't mean it in the loving, all-encompassing joy that Madame Montgomery did. Madame Montgomery didn't just see light, didn't see the sun. She orbited around him. Her life was incomplete without him, impossible without him.

Dad's idea of the sun was not that which made all life possible. His idea of the sun was the headache he gets when he's driving, the sunburns that hurt in the summer, the glare on the TV from the window. Harrison was not the light that guided the way. He was the fiery ball of catastrophe. Get too close, and you're destined to get burnt.

Harrison's suspicions, his fears, were confirmed. His father didn't just *not want him* . Harrison was his father's nightmare. Undesired, like a nasty rash.

Happy birthday to me .

Harrison steps out onto the courtyard, and smokes that stupid fucking cigarette he stole from Dad's drawer a few weeks prior, the day he decided he had to end things. The lighter is foreign in his hands. He hasn't held one in years. His thumbs are soft and not used to the roughness of the spark wheel. He turns his face toward the clouds. It's humid today. It must've rained this morning, judging by the dew on the grass. The air does not smell fresh nor welcoming. It's thick with the stench of his cigarette and rotting leaves. A landscaper is working on cleaning the courtyard, but it's no use. It will be miserable regardless of his work. Winter is upon them, and summer joy has died out.

"Dad hated smoking," Kate says quietly from behind him.

"Yeah, well, he hated me too. Good fucking thing he's dead I guess," Harrison mutters, flicking the ashes aside.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"I don't," Harrison puffs out a breath, watching an artistic paint brush stroke of smoke clouds drift with the breeze. "Got it from Dad."

"He didn't smoke," Kate scoffs.

"Oh, so we're lying now?" Harrison chuckles dryly. Kate frowns, folding her cardigan around herself tighter. She's never seen her

brother like this before. “I’m fine. Go inside.”

“No you’re not,” Kate argues. Harrison grits his teeth. He hates being told what he is and what he isn't. No one gets to make that choice but him. “What’s wrong?”

“Go away, Kate,” Harrison says again.

“It’s your birthday, and you’re miserable,” Kate presses. “And you literally got to spend all of last night with-” her voice falters. She bites her cheek, then glances down at her phone. She considers the texts she received from Eleanor and Quinn earlier today. “Oh.”

“Don’t *oh* me.”

“I’m just saying, we talked a couple weeks ago about that whole-”

“ *Shut up* , Katherine,” Harrison snaps. “We split off because we wanted to avoid having anyone else know. So shut up, and leave me the hell alone. This has been a sucky enough day as is.”

Kate, unlike Harrison’s wishes, doesn’t leave him be. She does the exact opposite. Her hand rests on his back, head rested against his arm, and just leans against him. At first, Harrison was infuriated. He felt his anger flare. He didn’t want to be touched, or bothered, or near anyone, especially not the very reason he ended things when he did. If Kate never found out, if none of them ever found out… maybe they would have bought more time. Maybe they would have made it.

But as the seconds pass, and it gets harder to breathe, he couldn’t imagine not having Kate at his side. He can barely stand on his own as grief swallows him whole, a melancholia that he’s never faced on his own before settling deep in his lungs alongside the nicotine and tar. He’s always been the crutch for his sister, and never the other way around. He’s not sure how to be melancholic. He’s not sure how to be sad, because it’s never been his turn to feel . It’s been Dad’s as he fights cancer, and Kate’s as she battles her mental health problems, and Mum’s as she wages a war with her own thoughts and desires, and it’s been Grans as she leads several countries at once. And today is his turn. Finally, the “sad sword” has landed on him, and he is not sure how to wield it. Is he supposed to fight the demons that make him feel this way, or himself for not being happy?

He tosses the cigarette after smoking it to the filter. Kate drags him inside, insisting that it’s about to rain again. They sit together in the kitchen, Kate making a comfort meal Mum usually makes for Kate

when she is having a bad day. Harrison watches with tired eyes and a sad smile as Kate shows the same love that Harrison, Mum, and Josephine give her.

Mum joins them shortly after. Josephine too. They make dinner together, and no one mentions the dreadful look on Harrison's face, or the way he nearly cries when they ask if he wants a cake. They don't acknowledge any of it. Kate keeps touching his hands, his shoulders, hugging him, and everyone keeps walking on eggshells, out of both fear and concern. No one wants to be at fault for Harrison's shitty birthday. Unfortunately, this year, the fault is entirely his own.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, okay. I know this is a shorter chapter, but I think I'm going for quality over quantity here. Also, I have a ~lengthy~ chapter in progress, but it's not coming until, like, 19 or 20. We need to sit in this angst for a minute before we hop into new angst. If everything goes as planned, PROBABLY chapter 19.

So, uh, saw someone rec this on tiktok today. sometimes i forget that the internet is a place thats open to everyone and that there are actual people on the other side. so i am both scared and elated to see how well people have responded to this fic. So, uh, hi tiktok. thanks for reccommending the fic. it kinda made my day, and really inspired me to push this out despite being at work all day lol.

again, if you're ever looking for updates on when a chapter is coming out, drop a follow on @ mellohayl on twitter. i don't have a lot of followers, and thus, i have no shame in self-promoting more than i should lol.

Happy Sunday, friends. enjoy your week. Perhaps another chapter tomorrow? maybe? depending on what my schedule looks like? ;)

Chapter 18: Eventually

Chapter Summary

> The ghost of past, and haunting loneliness. Caleb faces his father, who, unlike Harrison's, is unfortunately NOT dead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In due time, Caleb does feel guilty for not talking to Harrison, not texting him, and not answering his phone calls. He does feel guilt in avoiding Harrison on his birthday, and in ignoring Harrison's sister's texts, and changing the subject whenever he was brought up. In truth, Caleb just simply couldn't handle it. It was one more abandonment, one more loss he wouldn't be able to recover from. Not this quickly, at least.

The first few days after Harrison left were shockingly easy. He just carried on, life as usual. He got the daily texts and phone calls. He didn't answer any of them, but that was more to salvage his own heart than out of anger. Any of Caleb's anger, any of his pain, he knew the source wasn't Harrison. It was that which kept them apart. Politics, and reputations, and their fathers. It's like a story of *Romeo and Juliet* ; they are doomed for failure. Caleb was so hopeful for a good ending, though.

As they tick through November, Caleb started to feel the absence. Even with the texts and calls that he didn't answer, even with Annika, Quinn, and Eleanor all still talking to the royals all the time and talking about them, he felt the loneliness creep up on him with a talon-like grip on his shoulders.

November is a quick month. The end of the month arrives before Caleb realized, and the end of the semester was upon him. He was barely passing any classes, and straight up failing calculus now that Harrison wasn't here to be his math tutor. His GPA was suffering, and he still hasn't chosen a major. Next semester was practically null and void without a course of action for his studies.

He's been in the map room for about four hours now, hiding from everyone. From Eleanor, and Quinn, and Annika, and his mother. He wants a moment alone, a moment to breathe. His father has written

him a few notes, pressuring him to make his final decision, and fast. Diya has been trying to snag him all month to meet with him.

She was the first to know something was up, thanks to an email from Harrietta Montgomery.

That was a rather unpleasant conversation, to say the least. He was getting ready for bed, just trying to get his mind off of school, and his old friends, and Harrison. Freaking *Harrison* . Always knows how to fuck Caleb over. Caleb would love to go back to the days where he despised his royal guts, down to the damned cushion he sits upon. He would kill to feel that same hostility again, rather than the ache in his chest, yearning for something he can't have.

This is for the best he reminds himself.

"What did you do?" Diya accuses.

"What do you mean *'what did i do'* ?" Caleb yawns, carefully tossing the ugly throw pillows away from his bed, out of his way so he can just sleep. He's barely slept in a while-- he feels like that's just the story of his life, though. Somehow, it's only gotten worse since Harrison left. Even without the phone calls that kept him up late, without the text threads that last hours, and the pining, he can't sleep just the same. His panic attacks returned, too. He's lost any sense of stability.

"I just received an email from Harrietta that Harrison has been a shell of himself since their flight back to London. It's starting to look bad with the press."

"Why do you just assume I did anything to make that happen," Caleb scowls, refusing eye contact. Diya kicks his door shut. *Shit* . "He is not my responsibility."

"What did you do?" she asks again, this time quieter, and lacking any of that political convolution. Something soft, and almost motherly.

" *I* did nothing," Caleb says, equally as soft. He busies himself with folding a blanket to avoid looking at her. He sniffles. "He broke up with me."

Diya doesn't respond at first. She watches Caleb's brows furrow, and his face turn away when he sniffles again. The room is quiet, with just the sound of their breathing, and distant sounds down the hall from Eleanor playing music in her room.

“What happened, honey?”

That night, Diya spent about two hours with Caleb in his bedroom. She sat with him when he cried over everything. Not just Harrison. Not just the pain of lost hope and loneliness. But everything else, too. He cried about being homesick, and missing Atlanta, and losing his friends, and hating everything he’s doing. She sat with him, his head in her lap, and she let him sulk. She didn’t have time to be his emotional support-- Diya had meetings, and important phone calls, and honestly? She had a home-life, too. But this outweighed any meeting. This was more important than anything her sister might want to say when she calls her. Maybe she doesn’t have all the answers, but she can, at the bare minimum, be there in a way no one else is willing to be.

Diya has not left him alone since that night. It’s been three weeks now. Almost four since Harrison and Caleb split. Four agonizing weeks of Harrison texting and Caleb not responding. Four weeks of people asking him, *“how’s Harrison?!”* and Caleb not having an answer for them. His father was starting to suspect something happening, hence, hiding in the map room.

Eleanor is the one who finds him. She lays on the floor at his side, staring up at the ceiling in silence with him. There’s motion from outside, and occasionally, a major breeze from outside. It’s Thanksgiving this week, and Caleb is lost in his head. He can’t come up with a single thing to be grateful for. A family that doesn’t love him? A home he can’t stay in? A life that treats him unkindly? Friends he doesn’t have?

“Dad wants to see you,” Eleanor whispers finally. Caleb just nods. “Today.”

“I’ll see him,” Caleb insists quietly. “Just… not right now.”

“Why?” Eleanor turns her head to look at him. “Are you in trouble?”

“Probably,” he shrugs, eyes tracing the crown molding on the ceiling. “If I’m not now, I will be then.”

“What did you do?” Eleanor asks curiously, rather than accusatory. Caleb shrugs in response. “Fair enough.”

Eleanor can see her brother was in no mood for conversation. She stays there anyway, though. Just in case he changes his mind. Just in case he looks back over and wants someone who cares.

When Mom calls for dinner, it's a small table of people. Andy and Bridgette are both away, leaving just Mom, Caleb, Danny, and Eleanor. They say grace, and Caleb picks at some of his food without enthusiasm. Mom watches him, pushing potatoes and peas around his plate, chin held up by his palm, and tired, sunken eyes.

She doesn't ask. As much as she wants to, as much as her curiosity gets the best of her, she doesn't ask. She just looks away. It's better that she doesn't see it. It's better that she is not part of his drama.

Dad comes down from his office at the tail end of dinner. He stands still in the doorway to the dining room, surveying the silent space with a scowl. After a long day of working his ass off, he would have been thrilled to see his family being, you know, a family. Talking. Telling stories. Greeting him.

"I saved you some chicken," Mom tells him without looking up. He glares at her before sitting. He flicks a napkin over his lap and makes a plate, sure to scrape and slam his utensils at every given opportunity. Caleb flinches every time. "Would you like potatoes, darling?"

"Did someone die?" Dad asks coldly. Caleb bites his cheek, taking a bite of potato before he's targeted next. "The energy in here is that of a morgue. Is it because I'm here? Am I so dreadful to my own family that-"

"It's not you, Daddy," Eleanor says sweetly. Her kind little voice, the gentleness to her tone, is always what makes Dad stop in his rampage. It's brilliantly manipulative. Right on cue, Dad's eyes soften, and he gives Eleanor a pleasant half smile. "We're just sleepy. Excited for Thanksgiving. Right?"

"Right," Mom agrees, feigning a smile. She's really good at that, Caleb notes. Danny and Caleb nod along, too.

"Good," Dad nods once. "Thank you, sweetheart. Tell me about your day. You are off from school for the holiday, correct?"

Eleanor tells Dad all about her day, lying the entire way through. She tells him a tale of talking to friends she didn't have, of bowling, and playing games, and studying hard for her test after Thanksgiving recess. She talks about how she spent two whole hours in the music room practicing for her piano recital. Danny, who actually spent his day in the music room, doesn't correct her. Her lies bring a smile to Dad's face, and thus, make dinner infinitely easier.

When Eleanor is done talking, Dad talks about Andy and Bridgette. Andy is away for a United Nations meeting in Germany. He mentions something about the royal family going, too, eyeing Caleb as he said it. Caleb gives him no reaction.

Bridgette is apparently with her boyfriend in California— Caleb was unaware Bridgette even had a boyfriend. That was complete news to him. He talks about work, as boring as it is. Mom does, too. Meetings, and phone calls, and lots of binders and legal pads. Dad asks Danny about school, and Danny gives him a short answer that always suffices: *"good. Got honor roll again"*.

Finally, Dad turns to his middle child, his eldest child amongst the table. The next to leave the nest, he prays.

"I've been trying to catch you for weeks now. Don't run off after dinner. We need to meet."

"Yes sir," Caleb nods once in agreement, forcing a smile. Dad does not match it.

Caleb helps clean up after dinner in hopes of buying time, but the staff eventually push him away. He's getting in the way of their jobs at that point. Caleb hovers by the dining room doorway as Mom and Dad talk quietly between the two of them. Danny and Eleanor both run off and away from this hell hole.

"I don't know, darling," Mom sighs, carefully putting out candles on the table. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"Because the boy will never look at me, nevermind talk to me. I don't trust him to tell me the truth. I can't trust him as far as I can throw him," Dad sighs.

"Maybe that's the root of the issue then. You need to trust your son," Mom shrugs.

"Because that comes so naturally for you, doesn't it?" Dad shot back. "He's a failure, Beatrice. He's going to keep running from that label until he runs face first into a wall. And there's no getting past the wall when he gets there."

"You underestimate him," Mom insists. "He's a smart boy."

"A smart boy who can barely tell his left from his right," Dad scoffs. "Hasn't picked a damn major. Hasn't got a damned clue what he

wants to do. Hasn't so much as looked at his own grades. Did you know he was failing calculus?"

"Yes, darling," Mom sighs. "I'm the one who told you. I look at his grades weekly."

"What the hell is up with that? His brother passed that with flying colors in high school- "

"He's not his brother, Andrew," Mom reminds. "He's his own person. Have patience. Maybe try and talk to him. Just… not the way you talk to me."

"What is that supposed to-" Dad turns, and stops dead in his tracks as he makes eye contact with his son. Mom looks up, her face falling.

"Caleb," Mom says gently.

"You wanted to meet?" Caleb ignores her, hiding his tremors under his arms. Dad is silent for a long moment, unsure of what to say or do. He won't apologize for what he believes to be true, but he is sorry that his son had to hear it.

"Yes," Dad nods once.

"Andrew," Mom whispers.

"My office. I'll meet you there in ten," Dad instructs, waving him away. Caleb nods once before directing himself to the west wing.

He sank down in the oval office at one of the upholstered chairs across from Dad's desk. Sat on his desk are a couple photos that, under normal circumstances, might have made him smile. Photos of all five children on their first day of kindergarten: Bridgette, Caleb, and Eleanor were all missing teeth in their photo. Andy and Danny looked a little wild, with crazy wide eyes and goofy grins. There's also a photo of Mom and Dad from when they were teenagers, before any of the kids were born. And finally, a family photo. It must have been ten years old by now. Eleanor is a baby, Danny is a toddler. Caleb is barely 7 or 8, and Bridgette and Andrew are both preteens or teenagers. They all look young and happy, like a traditional family. It was taken at a park in Raleigh, South Carolina by his grandmother, and it's easily one of his favorite family photos.

Caleb averts his eyes when the door opens again.

“How much did you hear?” Dad asks, circling his desk and sinking down.

“A lot,” Caleb admits quietly.

“So you understand my disappointment?” Dad questions. *Understand* isn’t the word Caleb would use. He definitely heard his father’s disappointment. And he felt bad, knowing he caused it. But he didn’t understand any of it.

“Yes, sir,” Caleb lies.

“So let’s talk about how we’re going to fix it. Here and now,” Dad determines. “School. Pick a major. Now.”

Caleb takes a sharp breath. It’s not that simple. It’s not that easy. He’s spent two years taking classes, doing homework, talking to advisors, and no one ever has the answer for him. He doesn’t have a major. He doesn’t know.

“If you don’t, I will. Consider this your last opportunity to pick for yourself,” Dad presses. Caleb’s heart rate skyrockets. Dad will choose political science, or law, or medicine. “Ten. Nine. Eight.”

“English,” Caleb says finally, because he panicked. Dad sighs, but nods.

“I’ll take it,” Dad gives in. “There's some jobs out there. Not many. But you have a big name. Might as well use it.” Caleb nods, knees bouncing anxiously. He’s already second guessing himself. Maybe he should have said math. “Finals are next week. How are you going to pass calculus?” Right. He sucks at math. Definitely not math.

“I’ll talk to my professor this weekend. I’ll resubmit every assignment if I have to,” Caleb insists, voice wavering out of fear of his father’s cold stare.

“Yes. You will,” Dad nods once. “Just like you will do winter classes, and summer classes, and catch up. Get ahead if possible. I want you done with school ASAP. None of this five-year-program bullshit.”

“Yes sir,” Caleb nods quickly. He wants to die. He’d rather drop out and be excommunicated than do winter and summer classes. He needs a break. He needs a breath of air.

“Good. Tell me what’s going on with Prince Harrison.”

Caleb's stomach drops. He stammers for a response, but nothing comes out. His silence will not save him, but he cannot fathom a single answer that will be approved.

"Enough with the fuckin' stuttering. Tell me straight. Is there an issue with the dynamic? Who said what? Tell me what happened so I can keep us all out of trouble."

"Nothing happened," Caleb finally decides to go with. "We're still friends. Just… too busy."

" *Too busy* has the entirety of the UK thinking you fucked his sister," Dad spat at him, grabbing a magazine and thrusting it toward him. "The tabloids think your friendship crashed and burned. I think you're hiding shit to save your ass from the contract. So let me put it this way," Dad sits forward onto his elbows against the desk. "You fix whatever you did. You take back what you said, you apologize, you kiss their ass, and you put out some cutesy tweet about your best friend Harrison."

"Understood," Caleb nods, eyeing the magazine, then his father.

"I want that done by tonight. Not a damn moment to lose when re-election is on the line," he insists. Caleb nods again. "Get your shit together. You've been actin' like a pansy. You're twenty years old. I'm not holdin' your fuckin' hand anymore. Got that?"

"Yes, sir," Caleb says one last time. Dad nods, then waves him out the door. Caleb doesn't have to be told twice.

Breath shaking, he pulls out his phone and rushes out a text to Harrison. He knows the White House halls enough to not need to look where he's going.

*Caleb !******: big favor to ask of you*

*Caleb !******: im sorry*

*Caleb !******: my dad is about to mount my head over the fucking mantle. I know we just said we need to cool down on everything, but i need SOMETHING PR-y to appease my father. He made me sign a contract to be your best friend a few months ago.*

He keeps speeding through the halls, toward the east wing, toward his bedroom. He opens his laptop and submits the damned " declare major" form to his advisor. Next, he opens every social media app

imaginable and digs for some kind of picture of him and Harrison that he hasn't posted before, something that was normal, made them look happy and friendly but not *too* happy or *too* friendly.

He glances at his phone, the delivered receipt blindingly bold. He sends another text.

*Caleb !******: hi btw*

Finally, as if that's what it took, Harrison responds.

Just Harrison: hi

Just Harrison: post a pic from halloween. I have one that looks almost like we're having fun.

Just Harrison sent an attachment

The photo is heartstopping. Caleb looks at the photo longingly. He's not sure when this photo was caught, or by who. They were both leaning against the railing of the back porch, Caleb in his Grease Lightning costume, and Harrison as… Harrison. They both looked casual and friendly. Caleb thinks this might have been the exact moment before he and Harrison started arguing.

*Caleb !******: lifesaver. thank u.*

Caleb posts the photo, along with a couple others from Halloween, with some stupid caption along the lines of *forgot to post these, but here are some of my favorite people :)*

He can only pray it suffices.

Only now that the Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook posts have all gone out, does he realize what he did. He checks his texts again in hopes to see another notification, another sign of life from Harrison. There's nothing.

Finally, for the first time in four weeks, he scrolls through all his notifications since November 1st. Texts about fun facts, like *" if Saturn could fit on Earth, it would float in the ocean"* and *"strawberries aren't berries, but bananas and pumpkins both are."* Texts about important things going on; *"Kate is talking to a boy. Her and your sister are already planning a wedding, and she barely knows his last name."* And sometimes, it's just a plain ol' *"miss you."*

Caleb's thumbs hover over his keyboard. His last-sent text was almost fifteen minutes ago, haunting his screen. But he keeps looking at Harrison's text from November 21st at 5:00PM. *"Miss you."*

"Miss you too" Caleb almost writes. *"Can we try again",* he almost sends. " *You have no idea* ", he is so dangerously close to texting.

Finally, he decides on something small.

*Caleb !******: Talk to you soon…?*

Harrison's text bubble pops up and disappears, over and over again. Maybe he's doing the same thing Caleb was. Maybe he's in the same agony, staring down at a keyboard, unable to say what he actually thought. Finally, he ends with:

Just Harrison: eventually .

Chapter End Notes

> Is it 11PM on a school night? Yeah. Do i have an exam at 9:30 am? Yeah. Did i still spend all day writing this instead?
>
> …yeah.
>
> so freaking excited for chapter 19. yall have no idea. I have had chapter 19 written since before i wrote chapter 1. Chapter 19 is what inspired this entire piece. I'm gonna be editting the FUCK out of it to make sure its perfect because im very excited.
>
> Have a good week, friends!

Chapter 19: The Photos

Chapter Summary

> (TW for this chapter: themes of homophobia and abuse. This chapter is sectioned into four parts. The third part is where there is mild description of domestic violence. It's not super graphic, but please read at your own discretion. Take care of yourself first!)
>
> Every happy moment is no longer their own. All hope for bright futures seems to be lost.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s been approximately 3 years since Caleb last went for a run.

He used to do it daily when he was on the football team. He would run with some of the team, and Finch and Malcolm used to tag along, too. He used to be able to run a mile in 8-ish minutes, and he used to run approximately 5 miles daily.

But he’s not seventeen anymore. He hasn’t played a sport since Atlanta, and while he was far from unfit — he still took advantage of the home and hotel gyms everywhere he went— he forgot how hard it was to run.

The holidays are never easy on anyone. There’s always something about the holidays that stirs up aches and pains. Losing a family member, or not being able to afford presents, or not being able to make the big meals; everyone tends to suffer even a little around the holidays. Caleb tries to feel grateful. His Thanksgiving was okay. He texted Harrison a couple times, and spent the day hanging out with Quinn and Annika whenever they weren’t with their families. His friends were annoying and pestered him about what was wrong , but honestly? Caleb didn’t have an answer for them. Everything? Nothing?

He’s not sure anymore.

So, today, he runs.

It’s the early days of December, and he’s feeling it. DC is freezing over

for the season, and they had their first snow two days prior. He was mindful of patches of ice, but overall, the walkways were well paved. Music blares in his ears. If he wasn't running, it would be way too loud. But his heavy breaths and thumping heart sounded equally as loud in his head, so he continued to crank the volume. For once, his anxiety riddled thoughts were quiet, drowned out by all the other noise.

Just keep pace. Ignore everything else. He doesn't want to be running right now, but it seems to be the only thing getting him out of his head. Run, and run further, and faster, and just keep going. It's a little past seven in the morning. Everyone at home is either asleep or working on campaign stuff, and Caleb can't stand any of it. He just wants a chance to be out of his own head.

So, running.

His lungs burn. His legs hurt. He can feel his heartbeat in his throat. His hands sting from the cold. It's a shocking 29 degrees fahrenheit. After three years in DC, he thought he would be used to the cold, but alas, he is missing his 65 degree "chills" in Georgia. The reflecting pool is frozen over, and the National Mall looks cold, condescending, angry.

Notifications are rolling through his phone. Buzzes in his pocket and beeps in his headphones are growing overwhelming. He slows to a jog, then stops finally, tempted to sink down at a bench. He is unsure if he will continue running if he sits, though, so he avoids it.

He glances at his phone. At the very top of his notifications is a text from Mom. *"Come home,"* she wrote. Simple as that. Caleb furrows his eyebrows, and silences his phone, continuing his run. He does another lap around the reflecting pool before the incessant buzzing was driving him mad. He looks again. His phone has since imploded with texts. Annika, and Quinn, Eleanor, Mom. Diya's name is the one that sets off red flags. He looks between his phone, then the world around him. Everyone is drawn to their phone, and the news stands are murmuring amongst themselves.

He gets a notification from Twitter. People are tagging him— lots of politicians. Mitch McConnell, and Ted Cruz, and AOC alike are all tagging him. More texts flood in. Panic starts to set in. He's unsure if he should check Twitter or the news first. He fears he already knew what was happening before he checked.

He was proven correct.

An article was published by TMZ, with a series of photos. Photos from a dark night in the rose garden, sat under the stars they couldn't see and an almost full moon. Photos of soft smiles, closer than they should have been, of a whispered *happy birthday* . Photos of soft eyes and softer kisses that made them feel like they were floating.

His heart plummets. He feels his blood rush to his feet. He almost drops to the ground, then and there. He's tempted to— his fear has him barely standing, knees trembling.

He gets another Twitter notification. One from one of Dad's best friends. He knew better than to look, but he does it anyway. He looks, and watches in horror as every member of the republican party (and a good percentage of the democrats, too) throw around words like *traitor* and *dirty* and *sinful* . His own godfather, his own uncles, people who use the Chapman name for their own success, drag him through the mud without care. His name has turned sour in their mouths. The article surfaced less than an hour ago, but has already taken up three trending spaces on Twitter. The American people were horrific. Caleb has never seen so many slurs pointed at him, and he grew up in the most republican part of Atlanta.

He's shaking, and breathless, and he's not sure what to do. What can he do at this point? Run? Hide? Try to avoid the allegations and avoid the press? He can already see people looking at him from afar.

He pulls up his contacts and tries to call Harrison. All it takes is one ring before it goes to voicemail. Caleb tries again, but to no avail. He wanted to try a third time, but Diya was already calling him. *Here comes the storm* .

He answers.

"Honey, where are you?" Diya asks immediately. "I will come and get you. I am already on the road. Where are you-"

"Di-" Caleb's voice breaks, looking over his shoulder, panicked about who might see him, who might be watching. "Diya, what's happening?"

"Deep breath, hon. I'm coming to you. Where are you?"

"Outside-outside the Lincoln Memorial?" Caleb looks up at the looming structure. There's a loud bang from a cart not that far away.

Caleb flinches. He needs to sit down. He needs to breathe. He can't breathe. "What's happening?"

"We can talk in the car. Hang on," she insists. "I'm only five minutes away. Go toward the road. Start walking toward the Washington Monument. I will grab you from the curb. Meet me halfway."

"Okay," he choked out. "Okay. I'm-I'm going."

"Good. Good," she nods to herself, equally as frantic, and almost equally as scared. She'll let him win that one, though. If anyone deserves to feel scared, it's him.

She is far from the safest driver on the road, but her main concern is finding him, and getting him home. She pulls over the moment she spots her little travesty of a first-son, getting out of the car and instantly yanking him into a hug. She doesn't care if he's drenched in sweat, and she doesn't care who's watching. She just wants him to be safe.

"I got you. You're okay," she says gently. "Get in the car. We'll figure this out."

"Does Dad-" Caleb starts.

"In the car first," Diya instructs, pointing him to the passenger seat.

He nods, sinking down into the seat, raking his shaking fingers through the roots of his hair. Diya starts driving them back again, looking over every few moments. It's exactly as she fears. He seems to only devolve with every passing second, every incoming notification. News articles, and Twitter, and texts alike-- the world is imploding. His world is imploding.

He makes the mistake of actually opening his Twitter homepage. The very first article on his feed-- *Red, White, and Royal Blue-- Prince Harrison of England and First Son of the United States, Caleb Chapman, caught in an intimate moment in the Jackie Kennedy Rose Garden-"*

"What the fuck, Di…" he says shakily. "What the fuck. "

"It's going to be fine. We'll fix this. We'll fix it," Diya insists. She reaches out to touch his shoulder, but he instantly winces away, engrossed in his phone.

The articles are rapidly multiplying. TMZ, The Daily Mail, People

Magazine , they are ruthless. *“Star Crossed Lovers”* one titles it. *“What does the international romance mean for the USA and the UK?”* Twitter trends are skinning him alive right now. Some of his closest friends through the White House, some of Dad’s top staff, @’ing him on twitter, criticizing his “disgusting” and “sinful” lifestyle. Some of the people his parents consider family. Some of the people he would be eating dinner with this holiday season.

Fucking Richard Beattie is having a field day with this. Annika’s father, accusing Caleb of espionage, of trading national secrets, and insisting that Caleb’s father plotted it all. Caleb didn’t even realize Richard Beattie was in the presidential running for 2020 until that moment. His numbers just skyrocketed, and Dad’s were plummeting.

He’s lightheaded, nauseous, and God, he just wants to go home. But, like always, he is stuck at that crossroads… there is no such thing as *home* . Because Georgia was home, and Grandma and Grandpa’s house was home, and Harrison was home, but none of those are attainable anymore.

All he knows is, home is not the stuffy and historical White House. It’s not his room that he’s barely touched since they moved in January 2017. It’s… it’s everywhere he can’t go. All the places he can’t be. The people he can’t see.

When they arrive at the White House, everything is still. Caleb almost expected frantic yelling and sprinting across the foyer, people carrying papers, and coffees, and shouting that President Chapman is *pissed* . He almost hoped for noise, for wreckage that he could hide in. He could easily slip through crowds, he could easily go unseen.

The house is silent. Not a damned staff person in sight. Only the security personnel that always stand on duty. He expected anarchy, for fire to start burning him from the depths of Hell, and for Mitch “the bitch” McConnell himself to escort him to a guillotine.

Instead, it’s quiet. It isn’t quiet in the good way, though; in the way of peace and nature. It is quiet in the way the apocalypse is quiet. In the way a horror movie is quiet as the protagonist hunts down a murderer, right before a jump scare. The silence isn’t safe-- it’s scarier than chaos. He was playing the worst ever waiting game.

He hides away in the safety of the East Wing, pacing his bedroom, and once again trying to call Harrison. Again, and again, and again. He doesn’t care if it’s a two second call-- any sign that Harrison was

okay, that he was alive, is what mattered. He would take the smallest of breaths, he would take an insult, a *fuck you, don't call me* . He would take anything that showed that he was okay.

His phone goes to voicemail, every time. Caleb is scared of what their conversation might be, but nothing scares him more than losing Harrison entirely.

Diya stands in the doorway, watching with sad eyes, trying not to cry over Caleb as he starts to break. He's barely holding himself up anymore. For what feels like the fiftieth time, he gets voicemail.

"Hey," Caleb's voice shakes as he leaves a message. He gets it. Harrison isn't answering. "I-I know shit just got crazy. And I can only imagine how busy and frantic you are… I-I just…. I just need to know you're safe." He sniffles, running a hand over his face. He takes a breath, unsure how he hasn't passed out yet. He's running on absolutely no sleep, whatever is left of last night's dinner, and adrenaline from a forty five minute run. "I don't need much. I don't- I don't care. I'd be happy with you yelling at me at this point. Hate me. Whatever. We can talk about any of that later. Just… just give me a sign you're okay. Let me know you're safe, and everything else can come after." He looks up to avoid letting tears fall. Even in his almost solitude, he refuses to cry. Not yet. It can't be over yet. "Talk to you soon. Love you. Bye."

He ends the voicemail, pulling his phone away from his ear and pulling up their texts. The last text Harrison sent was last night, 5PM. *It's gonna snow this week.* Nothing this morning. There's a void where Harrison's usual 6AM text typically sits. Caleb writes a brief text.

*Caleb !******: I know you're busy, and probably just as freaked as I am. Just let me know you're okay. I'll even take a thumbs down emoji right now. Just some sign that you're alive.*

He hits send, biting his knuckle as he watches his phone try and send it. The blue loading bar at the top of their messages is so close to the edge of his screen. Come on. Just send. Just deliver.

His phone vibrates. The text is highlighted in red. *This text cannot be sent* .

Like stepping on a landmine, like a bomb went off, Caleb gives up. He turns and throws his phone as hard as possible at the wall opposite of him. Get the treacherous device off his body, and away from his heart. He drops to the floor, hands covering his face as he sobs. Anger, fear,

pain, and desolation; he shatters into a million pieces. Diya swiftly joins him, taking him around the shoulders, chin tucking atop his head, letting his tears stain her blouse. She's not sure what she should say, what she could say. This was not part of her training.

Within a few minutes, President Chapman pages her. She is ordered to come to his office immediately. She weighs her options-- leaving Caleb to himself, with nothing but his blind panic as company, or stay, and lose her job. She, for a long moment, considers sacrificing it all. She considers giving up her job, telling the president *screw you* , and staying, comforting the son he didn't love.

The final decision, ultimately, is to go. If she wants to be here for Caleb, if she wants to see him survive this, she needs to last. Even just until the end of the week. She can get fired Saturday. But not today.

Caleb is equally as hysterical without her as he was with her presence. He doesn't budge from his spot, doesn't make any attempt to save himself anymore. He forfeits to fear, to anxiety, and to the inevitable. His father will kill him. His mother will follow Dad's lead, regardless of her own feelings. He'll never see his siblings, never come back from this. He thought his future was dull before-- he just lost everything he had left.

He grieves his relationship with his family, and his relationship with Harrison. He grieves for a life he never had, and a family he will never be loved by. He mourns a future that was never his. The photos were out there. What is left to say now?

Harrison spent the morning at St George's Chapel. He had no clue what would ensue that day, which makes it infinitely more ironic that, of all places, he spent the majority of his day at a church.

Truth be told, he had no good reason to be at the chapel. Perhaps he was looking for some form of closure that most people find in religion. Maybe he wanted to go to a church that he knows he could be safe in. Maybe he just wanted to be near Dad-- none of it really made sense, in truth. He was just… there.

He spent a long time in the tombs, arms folded over his chest, as if protecting his heart from the spirits of his genocidal ancestors. Gran's parents, her siblings, and his own father lay at rest for the remainder of time in this room, and it is equally creepy as it is comforting. He never knew any of these bastards, not even the man he is most directly related to. That is what made him feel better about it all. Even

if he dies and is left among them, too, he will never be one of them.

Nearing 11AM, he receives notice from Madame Montgomery that his grandmother wants to speak with him. He is directed to go straight to Buckingham Palace and meet her there. For a moment, he feels no fear. There is nothing he's done wrong. He has saved them from being outed, and he's repressed every part of himself to protect them from backlash.

He is due to send Caleb his 6AM EST text in the next few minutes.

When he steps into Gran's office, he is met with a room, full to the brim. Aids, staff, security detailing, and Gran. The entire room looks at him, but as if on instinct, they immediately look away and avoid eye contact, pretending that he wasn't there at all. Gran is the only one who doesn't break eye contact. He realizes, quickly, that she was glaring at him. A stare that could kill. He pales.

"Harrison, take a seat," Gran orders. "The rest of you, out. I need to speak with my grandson before we finalize our course of action."

"Gran-"

"I did not give you permission to speak," she snaps. "Sit. Silence. I will get to you shortly."

Fearing for their jobs (and likely their lives), the staff scurries away from her office, like rats hiding from a house cat. Harrison sinks into a leather chair across from her desk. His heart is racing.

"Place your phone on my desk."

He does as told, setting it on the thick wood. She takes it, and with her elderly, shaky hands, she pushes a paperclip into the side and pulls out his sim card, then powers it down entirely. He loses contact with the world in an instant. Somehow, he knew before she said it.

"There's been a leak," she announces. "And before I do… anything …. I need to know if it's true or false. If, by some Grace of God, it's false, we can solve this. Easy . If not…" Gran takes a breath, folding her hands in front of her. "I'm not sure yet. I'll be true. I have no idea, whatsoever, what we will do." She stares him down, watching him squirm in his seat, watching him stir. It's sadistic-- playing with her prey before she kills it. "Photos have surfaced of you and the Chapman boy in the Rose Garden. Intimate ones. Give me one word. Are they true or not?"

He can't breathe. What did he do?

"I need a response, Harrison."

"True," Harrison says, voice scratchy, fearful. Gran stares at him for a long moment, as if praying for it to be a prank. While she would rather die than have someone, have her own grandson, play a prank on her, she would rather have the photos be false than anything else. She does not want these photos in existence. She does not want a queer grandson, and certainly was regretting having a grandson at all. "What-"

"Quiet," she commands. "Your voice is giving me a migraine." Nausea grips him. He wants to lunge forward, send Caleb a text, contact him. If there's anyone he needs to speak with, it's him. "The photos have not been published yet. It's a blackmail tactic. We are trying to narrow down the source before the photos are public-"

"Does he know?"

"I thought I asked you to keep silent?" Gran scolds. His anger flares. He almost snaps back at her. He's so close. But he holds his temper. His life is on the line. He bites his tongue. "No. If he had thought about this, if any of them had half of a brain, they would know. But I assume the Chapmans forget their own names-"

"Enough," Harrison snaps. Gran shot her attention up, appalled. "I understand you are angry, and I feel your worry, but I draw the line at slander."

"I am saving you, Harrison," Gran says in response. "I expect a thank you . Not an attitude. I have seen the photos. These will not just ruin you. It will ruin us all. It's high time you start thinking of anyone but yourself."

"I am," Harrison argues. "In fact, I'm thinking of everyone but myself. Are you?"

"Consider this your last warning to stay quiet," Gran threatens. "Forget the Chapman boy, Harrison. We are focused on you . Saving your reputation."

Quiet consumes them again. She starts to scrawl on her notepad, no longer humoring his curiosity or disparity to know the next steps. He's restless in his seat, knees bouncing, hands twitching, writhing, unsure of what he can say or do. They sit in overall silence for almost ten full

minutes. She does not look up from her notes, aggressively punctuating every sentence she writes with a slam of her pen.

Finally, someone knocks on the door. Gran calls for them to enter without looking up. Harrison looks over his shoulder, barely holding back tears. Madame Montgomery stands there, stiff, tall. She sends him an apologetic frown.

“Your majesty,” Harrietta speaks gently. “It’s out.”

“Son of a bitch,” Gran curses, instantly grabbing the office phone and dialing a specific line. Harrison is holding his breath. He wonders if Caleb knew yet. He needs to talk to Caleb. “Euphemia. It’s out.”

Any emotion left, anything he was still holding in, falls out of him, clawing a hole through his chest and oozing itself onto the floor. Within an instant, Mum is flying through Gran’s office. Her first stop is Harrison. She does not greet her mother in law, doesn’t so much as look at Queen Helena. Her focus is her son.

“I thought we had- I-I thought we had more time,” Harrison looks frantically between the three women around him, eyes welling with tears. Mom holds his face, and she’s talking to him, but he can’t hear any of it. His mind is screaming, like blaring fire alarms telling him to escape. Escape where? “What do we- How am I supposed to-”

“Sweetheart,” Mum soothes, a thumb tracing his cheek bone. “Gather yourself. It will be alright.”

“I-I’m- I don’t-” Harrison stammers, feeling like his head is full of brisk air, rather than brains. He can’t think straight.

“It’s okay,” Mum insists, taking him into a tight hug. He’s not sure of the last time his mother hugged him. He’s not sure of the last time he wanted a hug from her. Today, though, at this very moment, he needed it. He needed the pressure around his shoulders, her lips against his head, whispering assurances that he would be okay. She will protect him. She loves him.

“He’s- Mum,” Harrison starts to choke out, the tears falling freely now.

“That’s enough , Harrison,” Gran sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. Euphemia doesn’t release her son. Harrison winces into Mum’s shoulder. She acts as a human shield, protecting his heart and soul with her own body.

Euphemia doesn't recall the last time she held her son like this. It must have been years. Perhaps, not since he was a toddler, in need of consoling. He did not seek her comfort after his father died. He did not look to her for help when he was in trouble as a teen, never sought her out for advice. Harrison buries into her shoulder in search of safety, a comfort his grandmother would not give; a safety Gran was incapable of providing. Mum's hand glides along his back, firm pressure over his tense shoulders. She recalls her first days after having him, the first days spent entirely alone, just her and her son. She soothed every cry, snuggled for every moment, kissed him upon every opportunity. And she recalls his little trips and falls as a toddler, when he ran straight to her for comfort. She doesn't think he ever did it again after the age of five.

"You're safe," Mum whispers into his hair, thumb brushing over his lengthening hair, the waves that so beautifully fluff out his head.

" *He* isn't," Harrison finally says. He's given up on pleasing Gran. That is the one thing on his mind. The only thought that consumes him. Mum looks between his eyes, swiping her thumb along the base of his head again. "They'll kill him."

"I'm sure no harm will come to him-" Gran says, tired of the theatrics.

"Have you *met* Andrew Chapman?" Harrison finally snaps at her. Taken aback, she falls quiet. She is both shocked and amazed by an attitude never before seen on her gentle, silent, placid grandson. "Andrew is-is careless ,and *abusive* , and a horrific man. And I know your main concern is us, the monarchy, and your reputation, but mine? My main concern is him. My priority is him. His safety, and his well being. I will survive the press, but I don't trust that he will survive his own household. For once in your dreadfully long life, think of something other than publicity."

"I am!" she insists. "I am thinking of you-"

"If you were thinking of me, you would let me talk to him," Harrison argues. "I would be allowed to reach out and-"

"No, Harrison," Gran shouts. "My answer is no."

"I am no less gay when you tell me no!" he yells back, yanking away from his mother, marching toward his desk and slamming a fist on her desk. "No matter what you say, no matter your decision, I will always be *that* . No matter how disgusted, no matter how much you want a different life for me-"

“I am trying to help you!”

“How?” He cries. “This is torture! Not help! I get that you’re pissed off, and I get that this sucks. If anyone knows, I do. But you aren’t helping. You only make things worse.”

“In the eyes of the public-”

“In the eyes of your grandson-”

“ *Learn your place!* ” Gran stands as well, her voice booming through the room. Harrison flinches away. “You cannot simply tantrum and get your way. My word is final. Here, and everywhere else. Am I understood?”

Harrison doesn’t say anything. He’s never wished worse upon his own family. Never hated his grandmother, his parents, his sisters, or himself more than this very moment. “His place” was silence. This was Gran’s resolution, no matter his opinion. He is not his own soul. From his very birth, he belonged to the world, but the world did not belong to him.

“I asked you a question. I expect an answer,” Gran says, voice raspy with anger.

“What happens if I tell you no?” Harrison finally responds, lifting his hands from the desk, taking a single step back. An act of rebellion. He belongs to no one but himself. Before Gran can quip back, he continues. “What will you do if I choose him over you?”

“I will consider it no less than betrayal.”

“And?” Harrison presses. “What then? Do you plan to… out me? It’s a little late for that. Kick me out? Have me arrested for betraying the throne, despite committing no crime? How far are you willing to go to see me miserable?”

“Harrison,” Euphemia whispers her plea. “Please. Take a moment and think. Let’s breathe, love.”

“I am thinking,” Harrison insists. “What's your plan if I do obey? Bar me from speaking to him? Take my phone indefinitely? Marry me off to the first respectful girl under your kingdom that you can find? How did that turn out for my father?” Stunned, Mum blinks and winces away from a slap to the face from her own child. “I ask you again. How far are you willing to go to see me miserable?”

“Do you truly believe you would be happy without us?” Gran fires back.

“Without question,” he says without so much as a moment of hesitation. “Ideally, it wouldn’t be a choice. But when presented with the option, I would leave all of you. Every. Single. Time.” The air was thick, unbreathable. He almost cries, almost screams, hammers away at her desk more. But he doesn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing how much she hurt him. “I’ll prepare myself to leave. Summon me with *your* decision.”

He turns to leave. Gran doesn’t stop him. Euphemia almost reaches out, almost leaves a longing touch to his arm, almost pleads with him to stay. But she can only wish for freedom for him. After a marriage to a man who didn’t love her, and who hated the monarchy more, she didn’t want misery for her child.

His chest aches, and everything hurts. His very bones feel brittle with wear and age. He skirts his way toward his bedroom and places what he needs in a neat pile on his desk. Clothes. His wallet. Legal documents. The letter from Dad, which he had stolen from Dad’s office a few weeks prior. His pockets feel light without the pressure of his cell phone. He’s desperate to contact Caleb, to know he was safe. Harrison is unsure what he will do with himself if he isn’t, how he will survive in a world where his actions directly contribute to Caleb’s pain and ailments. A bag sits beside the stuff he’s packing, willing to stuff it all in within a moment's notice, should Gran make that decision. Hopefully, it doesn’t get to that point.

“Your decision or hers?” Josephine asks from his door. Harrison freezes at his desk. Perhaps, if he doesn’t move, she will leave him be. He has the burning lasers of eyes resting upon his back that makes it impossible to stand still. Slowly, she inches into the room, sinking down onto the sofa, folding one leg over the other. Her knuckles are white, squeezing her own hands. “To leave.”

“It’s not finalized yet,” Harrison responds quietly. “Depending on what she says… it will be mine.” Finally, he glances over his shoulder at his older sister. She was watching him, studying him, like an exhibit in a museum; an artifact, precious beyond words. “You saw?”

“I did.”

“And?”

“And?” Josephine shrugs. “My opinion doesn’t matter. You are just as

much my brother today as you were before I knew."

"But you have an opinion," Harrison says simply.

"It's irresponsible," she nods. "But love does not care for practicality or responsibility. It cares for love." Harrison nods once. "I figured the whole… liking men, thing. It takes either a real abstained man or a truly gay one to pass up every girl at Oxford University." Harrison scoffs, shaking his head with a sad smile. "Is he your first?"

"God, no," Harrison folds a shirt, setting it amongst the pile. "Plenty in university. A couple in college. I'm his first."

"Oh," she smirks, waggling her eyebrows. "Saucy."

"Don't do that," Harrison rolls his eyes. "Not that saucy. We've been separated for over a month now." And, just like that, her smile fell, and they were back in reality. Dreadful, pitiful reality. "Halloween. I figured, better that I end things before they catch us. It hurt, but I think he understood. Unfortunately, it didn't matter. They've been watching since day one, apparently."

"So you haven't spoken?" Josephine asks.

"Not really?" Harrison sniffles, leaning back against his desk. He thinks of one of the last things Caleb told him. That he signed a *contract* to be Harrison's friend. That, even if they were to fall out of love, it would be set in law that they pretend they were fine. Harrison thinks that might just hurt more than losing him in the first place. It's a slow torture. "A couple conversations since then.Mostly… contractual stuff. I text him. He doesn't… he doesn't text back. We… We all hurt differently." She nods slowly. "I just… I want to see him. Talk to him. Make sure he's okay. But Gran has my phone, and I am likely either being exiled or stuck into an arranged marriage. So… doesn't sound like I'm getting my way."

"Gran will pull herself together. She has no choice," Josephine shrugs. Harrison raises an eyebrow. "She needs an heir, regardless of how she feels about you, or your sexuality, or your sex scandals."

"She has you and Kate," Harrison says simply. Josephine smiles sadly.

"She didn't tell you?" Josephine asks softly. Harrison fears the worst, within an instant. Josephine is dying. She's going to die. She's got cancer now, too, and she's dying . "I met with her last week. Her, Mum and I. I'm… I'm abdicating."

“What do you… what?” Harrison is taken aback, slowly sinking down onto the sofa with her. She’s all smiles, but if anything, Harrison only feels worse.

“I signed the paperwork and everything. The crown is skipping me and my lineage,” she admits. “I… I’ve seen enough. I’ve done this country enough favors. When I… when I have children, I want them free from these burdens.”

“What are you doing instead?” Harrison sits forward, amazed at the new wealth of knowledge, and scared of what the impending future looks like. “Will you stay in London? Switzerland?”

“God, no,” she chuckles. “I’m… I’m actually going North. Scotland. Nan could use help with the farm, and… and when she passes, she’s already left the property to me. I… I don’t know. A simple farm girl in Scotland. Sounds fun.”

“You’re just… leaving us?”

“You’re not?” Josephine raises an eyebrow. Harrison’s shoulders drop. “If Gran comes to her senses… Harrison, you will be a wonderful, benevolent king. And if not… I’m sure Kate could do some good. Don’t you think?”

“You got the Scotland house?” Harrison finally realizes. “Are you… are you kidding?”

“Not at all,” she’s all smiles. Harrison wants to strangle her.

The Scotland house. The farmhouse he has never seen, the family he’s never met. The life he always wanted, and the one that’s been so heavily guarded from him. Harrison is not one to be upset with his sisters, the very women who inspire him to survive another day. But, he’ll admit… he’s angry. He’s over here, fighting for his life. He’s fighting for his love, and his mere right to exist. He’s packing the bare minimum of his belongings, and he’s about to lose his family, and he’s scared.

But Josephine… she is willingly forfeiting it all.

She is passing the crown to the next head. When Gran dies, Josephine is automatically surpassed. She will be busy on a farm, tending to some goats and sheep, and she will be baking dozens upon dozens of her special chocolate muffins, and she will likely have a family who will never know the pain and loneliness of Kensington or Buckingham.

They will not know the Windsor or Kensington name, their grandfather that would have hated their very existence.

He's not angry that she's escaping to the best possible future. He's jealous. Never has his future looked so dreadful, and hers so picture perfect.

Caleb has been in the sitting room for maybe two hours. The entirety of the morning and early afternoon was spent hiding in his bedroom, the door shut and locked, praying to a God he doesn't believe in for an answer from Harrison. Some sign that he was okay. No matter what Harrison texts with, no matter how Harrison feels, he just wants Harrison to be okay.

Caleb rarely fears his parents. Yes, he's been scared of what they may say or think, but rarely of *them* . He likes to consider himself pretty lucky in that fact.

There's a first for everything.

The White House is eerily quiet. Not even the ghosts of former presidents are creaking the floorboards out of fear of President Chapman's wrath. The staff is quiet, staying still in their designated locations. Occasionally, Diya drifts from the Oval Office to the sitting room where Caleb sat, entirely alone. She is the only person to spare him a single glance since the photos hit the public. The only person who hasn't yelled, panicked, screamed, pulled their hair out, who hasn't blamed him.

Diya sits on the coffee table directly across from the boy she practically raised. She takes the box of tissues and pushes it closer to him. Her hand rests on his knee, a small motion to show her support. Caleb's attention flickers up to her finally. They make eye contact for the first time since the morning. Diya can see the guilt, agony, and fear in his eyes. A boy who just wanted to feel something resembling happiness, being stripped of it in an instant.

"How are they?" Caleb asks through a raspy voice. Diya gives a sad smile, tragic in the way her hands and lips tremble, and her eyes glassy.

"She's fighting for you," Diya admits in a broken whisper. "She's trying so hard. I need you to know that before you face them."

Caleb's eyes close, and he sniffles, letting his head drop against his

folded hands again. Tears race down his cheeks, and Diya plucks more tissues, swiping the droplets from his chin and the tip of his nose, as if he were six years old all over again, in need of someone to give him a bandaid and maybe entertain him with an ice pack. Diya never wanted to be a mother— being the supervisor to five was more than enough— but she certainly felt like one on days like today, as she loved a son who wasn't hers.

"What do I do?" Caleb sobs quietly, falling against her chest. Her arms wound instinctively around him, a hand drifting across his shoulders. One of his father's assistants waits in the entryway, a solemn look on her face. She didn't want to rush him, but knew it would only be worse if they kept the president waiting.

"What you're going to do," Diya murmurs into his hair, rubbing his back. "Is… you're going to walk in there, and own it. Live that truth. No matter what your father says, no matter what he threatens, no matter what he does. You wear this with pride." Diya pulls back, cupping his jaw and carefully swiping his tears with dry tissues. "And if your Dad… decides to cut you off. Find me. And if he kicks you out, find me. And if he accepts you, find me. Right now… all you can do is face them and see what comes of it."

He didn't like that answer, but what other choice did he have? Run and never be seen again? Avoid his father as long as humanly possible? Die?

Diya makes a soft request to be the one who walks Caleb to the oval office. The assistant nods, walking slightly ahead of them. Diya's hand is on his back, keeping him from running off, from escaping his fears and the problems that wait ahead of them. Caleb is shaking, and he feels like he could vomit as he faces the doors to Dad's office.

Diya knocks for him. Dad calls back for him to enter, voice ragged. Diya whispers a soft *find me after* in his ear before letting him take the next step alone.

He slid through the door, quietly closing it behind him with a soft click . Dad stood at the window, a scowl on his face as he looked at something on his tablet. Mom sat in a nice arm chair, sat up straight and propper, wearing day-old makeup and her heels kicked to the side after a long night of pacing the office. Neither look at him.

"Do you want me to stand or sit?" Caleb whispers over the tension.

"I want you to tell me what the Hell you thought you were doing,"

Dad snaps. Caleb held his breath, unsure what to do, where to go, what he could say to make any of this better. “My nightmare was you *getting along* with the Brits. Causing a mayhem far worse than any rivalry. So I’m sure you can only imagine how I felt when I woke up this morning, going to the kitchen I worked my ass off to have, making my morning coffee, and seeing this on the front page of every major media site in the world.”

Dad slams his iPad down hard enough that Caleb feared it may shatter. He didn’t have to look at the screen to know what it was. He had seen the photos too. He had spent what felt like centuries staring at them, feeling his blood drain from his body, wondering the quickest way to kill himself to avoid facing his family after this. Side by side shots, a series of photos from what was supposed to be a quiet moment of seclusion in the garden. Caleb isn’t sure who took them, but he knew it was the end of the world when he saw it. His smile in the first photo gave it away, long before you see photos four through nine of Caleb’s lips tucked up against Prince Harrison of Wales’, with Harrison’s hand gradually looping around him.

“I’m fuckin’ talkin’ to you, Caleb. Look at me,” Dad commands. Caleb doesn’t dare budge, eyes trained on the floor. Dad grabs the family photo from his desk, Caleb’s favorite photo, throwing it in Caleb’s direction. He barely missed Caleb’s head, the wood splintering and glass shattering against the wall directly behind him, only an inch from his head. “Fucking *look at me* .”

Caleb does. He met his father’s eyes, his arms folded around himself for protection, and he is nauseous at the cold, unloving stare he’s met with.

“Tell me these images are false.”

He wants to. He wants to play that game. Recede away from everything he’s done. Leave Harrison, leave his happiness, leave it all, in order to stay safe. Play it off as a really good photoshop. He’s sure he could find some girl in any of his classes who would agree to invent new photos in the same place, with her in Harrison’s place. Let the photos be an attempt at a smear on the Chapman campaign, and a failed one at that. The photoshop doesn’t even look that good— look at the hands! They’re totally clip art.

Diya’s voice is in his head. *Live the truth* .

“Do you want the truth or what you want to hear?” Caleb responds,

soft, guilty. Dad is stood, aghast his son. For a split second, it feels like maybe , just maybe, things will be okay.

The fire lit under Dad's ass. He was a tank of gasoline, waiting to explode.

Dad plows forward, bitch-slapping his son before Caleb truly processes his approach. Caleb barely regains himself before Dad grabs him by the collar, slamming his back against the wall the picture frame just hit, standing in shards of glass and putting a Caleb-sized dent in the Oval Office wall. Caleb blocks his face with his hands as Dad yells and spits in his face, slamming his fists against Caleb's shoulders and arms. Dad had never been known for hitting his children. Being an asshole, being emotionally abusive, and maybe even too aggressive, but never *hitting* . This was a first. Caleb was horrified. He was too stunned, too scared, to even think about fighting back. He took each and every hit like they were lifelong foes. Like they were in a boxing ring, and Dad was a world-champion.

Mom leapt to her feet, prying at Dad's arms and pleading with him to take a breath, to try again later. Caleb slowly sinks to the floor, back against the wall, unable to make much noise, unable to panic. Just sink. He tucked his head to his knees and desperately shielded himself as best as he could.

" *Andrew* ," Mom says sharply, yanking on his arm. "That's enough!"

"You're gonna fuckin' fix this," Dad spits at his son, jabbing a finger at him. "I don't fuckin' care what you have to do. Lie. Fuck any girl in DC. Knock up a prostitute for all I fuckin' care. You fix this though. Deny everything. You don't let this get any fucking farther than it already has."

Caleb is heaving for breath, hands bloody from the sharp piles of glass, and tears on his face. He can feel a split in his lip, and the bruises forming on his body. He almost nods. He almost agrees. He just wants it to be easy. He wants to be liked. He wants a family.

But the tiniest shred of pride left in his chest, all that was left of his desire to be himself, made itself known.

"Or?" he sniffles, not shying away from eye contact with his father anymore.

"What do you mean *or* ?" Dad spits. "That's an order. Not an option."

“What if I don’t?” Caleb asks. Dad is silent, trembling with anger. He grits his teeth, incessantly cracking his knuckles and squeezing his hands into fists. Caleb pushes himself up again, grimacing at the sharp slices in his palms and the pain in his ribs. “What then?”

“Then you can get the fuck out,” Dad states.

“Andrew-” Mom intervenes.

“Shut the fuck up, Beatrice,” Dad snaps at her next. Caleb watches the fire flicker in her eyes. He felt a surge of anger course through him, too. If Dad moved toward Mom, Caleb would step in. Surely he could be brave enough for her. “You’re going to trash my re-election just by being here. You want to be independent so bad? Go fuck off to the South. Run back home to your Nana. See how those Redneck Hicks fuckin’ treat you. I’d love to see how long you’ll survive down there.” Dad sunk into his leather chair, knee bouncing and running his hands over his face. “Get the fuck out of my office. I don’t wanna fuckin’ see you until you fuckin get your shit together. Take your fuckin’ keys. Take the fuckin’ Atlanta house. I won’t need it for another four years anyways.” Dad buried his nose back into his tablet, shaking his head in disgrace at the photo still displayed on the cover. Caleb hesitates to move. “Out.”

“Yes, sir,” Caleb murmurs in response, quietly slipping out of the office, not turning back.

Mom follows him out less than a second later. He’s walking fast, trying to get the hell away from the West Wing, and the security details, and the staff that surround him at all times. He avoids making eye contact, and he ignores his mother’s voice calling after him, and he sure as hell gets away from his brother when he sees him walking down the hall. He keeps his head down, sliding behind the closed door of his bedroom, back against the wood. He sinks to the floor, holding his bloodied hands to his chest, gasping for breaths that never quite felt full enough. He pulls his knees up, head dropping against them, sobbing with his whole chest.

He’s helpless.

He’s not sure what it is that hurts the worst. The fear. The rejection. The exposure. The silence from Harrison. The absence of support. The loneliness. It all hurts. Everything but physically. He didn’t care about any of the wounds as much as he did everything else. He felt like he might throw up.

Mom is knocking gently on the door, soft requests for him to open it, to let her in. He doesn't even notice she's there. Thoughts are screaming, swirling in his head, a tornado siren versus the storm.

Harrison hides from his family for the remainder of the day. Josephine has infuriated him with her bright future, and Kate would just cry with him if he sat with her. He doesn't need commiseration. He needs answers.

He watches from his laptop as the online-scene only continues to implode. Harrison thought he had it rough, that is, until he saw all the politicians that had practically signed Caleb's death penalty. Harrison was rarely tagged in the threats-- the American politicians were smarter than that-- but he saw the colorful slurs, the photos, the propaganda that tore Caleb to pieces. Caricatures of pride parades, and accusing Caleb of being "dirty and diseased". Rumors of AIDS. The media was horrific.

The longer he waits, the more photos that surface. Photos he didn't know existed. Photos of Harrison and Caleb at the Swedish gala, Caleb holding his hand barely under the table cloth, photos from Josephine's birthday of the boys being a little too close. There's a photo from Halloween of Harrison kissing Caleb's shoulder.

He didn't know people captured these moments. He's not sure if he was hurt, betrayed, or angry that they all got leaked. Not a moment of his love was his own. Every time he was truly happy, displayed to the world, dissected like dead frogs. Their story of *Romeo and Juliet* was infinitely more brutal than the original.

Arms wound around himself, he sits in Dad's Buckingham office. This office doesn't hold as much value as the Kensington one. His classic leather chair isn't here, and most of his important documents were in his primary office. There is little to dig through, little to see. There's a painting on the wall, though, of Dad with Harrison's Uncle Arthur and grandfather. It's the only "photo" he's ever seen of the three men together.

Rather than his leather chair, Harrison finds comfort in the window seat, staring out at a rainy London night sky. Dad likely never sat here, never took time to ponder the city lights or the stars he cannot see. He wonders if Dad thought about much of anything other than himself.

His gaze lifts from the droplets trailing down the glass at the sound of

a set of footsteps joining the office space. He glances at his visitor, Gran standing tall, proud, and exhausted. She held her purse under her arm, watching him closely. His eyes trail away from hers and then back to the window. His arms wrap tighter around himself, sniffling.

“May I sit?” Gran gestures to the spot beside his feet. Harrison nods, pulling his legs closer to himself to allow her plenty of room. She sinks onto the bench with a small puff of exhausted breath. Her age shows at that moment. Harrison often forgets due to her attitude that she was in her late nineties, that she was just an old lady in her last years. “I never gave you my final answer.”

“You didn’t,” Harrison confirms in a whisper. “I figured… your lack of answer was the answer.”

“It was,” she nods, just once. Silence consumes them. Harrison’s shoulders sink, letting go of a breath. He was so tired. He didn’t want to leave, especially not at eleven pm. He didn’t want to start a new life. But he will do it. “Then your mother stayed in my office. Those Scots have one hell of a mouth on them. And… and she reminded me of a story of your father. One you might not have heard before.”

Harrison’s attention shot up. He looks at his grandmother, eyes softening. Damned Scots. Damned Josephine, ditching the family for people Harrison has never met and a home he has never seen.

“Your father married a woman, long before he married your mother. Her name was Ekatarina.” Gran is frowning, also looking anywhere but Harrison, also unwilling to make eye contact. “She was a beautiful Ukrainian girl. His age. Maybe a year or two younger. She was free spirited, and wild, and from the most secluded towns in Ukraine, she never understood our culture, our traditions.” Harrison nods. “Your father asked for my blessing after two months of dating her. He got on his knees and begged. Clutched the skirt of my dress and pleaded with me to let him be happy. He begged for my approval, and I told him no.”

Harrison conceives an image of his father. The tall, pale, wrinkled man, who had a permanent scowl etched on his face, a prominent wrinkle between his brows from how often he furrowed them. He was an angry man, and too proud to beg. He cannot see that same man, drop to his knees, pleading for anything. Not love, not a family, not even for himself. Harrison’s father never said please , nevermind begs.

“I never liked the girl. She was married once before. Divorced. She was unhealthy and would never have children, never provide an heir. But he loved her. He loved her more than he loved anything, or anyone. He took the ring that I ordered him to sell back to the jeweler, he brought her back to her hometown, and he proposed. They got married that same week. I recall him strolling into my office, no appointment, nothing, and waved his marriage in my face, slapped that paper down on my desk and asked me ‘ *what are you planning to do about it?* ’ . Nothing. I did nothing. He waved that marriage in my face until the day she died, as if to tell me…” Gran’s voice catches, and she swallows her pride. “As if to say, *this love is more important than your love.* And the guilt… when Ekatarina died… it was horrendous. Knowing your father would never recover from that heartbreak, knowing he will never forgive me for refusing to accept them. I live with that regret to this day.”

Harrison didn’t understand why she was telling him this, but he drank in every last detail of a life that showed his father as human.

“He married your mother later. He did not kneel. He did not smile. He did not beg. He simply asked my permission. And I almost regret granting it, because I could see he wanted me to tell him no. He wanted to die without a wife or an heir, let his life end with Ekatarina. He married your mother. He had three children. He loved you kids, in the way he thought he had to, but it would never hold a torch to his love for his first wife. And I have spent my life regretting not giving him my blessing, not giving Ekatarina a chance to make me proud. She taught me how… our bloodline is not important. It’s my children’s happiness. Your father never came to me when he grieved. Never came to me about anything after I rejected his partnership. I can’t make that mistake twice.”

“What are you saying?” Harrison asks, voice weak. He feels like he could cry.

“My son has been dead for six months, dear,” Gran swallows her pride, looking up at him, and reaching for his hand. “But not a single day passes that I don’t see his enthusiasm for life in you. And maybe you didn’t inherit his evils, but you sure have inherited his stubborn heart. You love more than you were ever taught how, and you smile… like you are seeing the stars for the very first time.” Gran squeezes his hand. “I want you to be happy. I do not wish your fathers misery upon anyone, but especially not my own grandson. I want you to trust me with your happiness, and I want you to trust that I love you more than I love my crown. So, if this is the path you wish to follow, then I

will… I will light the way. No matter my wants and wishes for your life… there is nothing more that I can ask of you than happiness.”

“What does this mean?” he asks again, tears streaking his cheeks, dripping from his chin pathetically.

“It means…” she smiles sadly, wiping his tears. “The Chapmans will be here this weekend to discuss our course of action. Paperwork and contracts included.” Harrison nods rapidly, choking on a sob he didn’t realize was sitting in his chest. “I don’t know about his condition. But I spoke with… Diya Hadid? She says that the Chapman family will meet Saturday.”

“Saturday?” Harrison responds weakly. Gran nods. “Thank you.”

And, just like that, the sobs consume him. She pulls him into a warm embrace, a hug he has never felt before. She has hugged him, she has touched his shoulder, kissed his cheek, but never has she held him. Her frail arms are oddly comforting. She’s merely an old woman, equally as lost in the conflicts of royal tradition and freedom. She won’t be like Harrison’s father, though. She wants these children to know she loved them before she dies.

Until Saturday, this is their life. Hiding from the inevitable.

Chapter End Notes

An end to the story is in sight...

I'm not entirely sure when it will be over. I'll be honest, I really just sit down and write, and hope it all comes together in the end. But I can tell the story will be coming to a close in the near future. Don't fret-- I will likely continue to write half-assed work

This is the chapter I've been eager for. I literally wrote all 9.3K words of this in about 6-7ish hours between classes and after i got home??? That being said, I prewrote a lot of it, too. I actually wrote a good portion of this chapter in one of my notebooks whilst procrastinating homework months ago, before I even CONSIDERED publishing to ao3.

Anyways, this is one of my favorite chapters. a reunion for our boys is coming soon... get excited y'all. You've been dealt the "hurt", let's get started on that "comfort" lmfao.

As always, have a good week, y'all :)

Chapter 20: It's Not Easy, But I Love Loving You

Chapter Summary

> To shitty life decisions, from the past, present, and future. Here's to many more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Caleb hides himself away in his bedroom for the following four days, waiting impatiently for Saturday to arrive. Obsessively, he checks his phone, waiting for a text back from Harrison, waiting for some kind of sign that their lives aren't over yet, waiting for some kind of sign that he was okay.

He gets nothing.

It's not smart to check the news, but he can't help refreshing the Twitter trending pages every couple of hours. Once, on the third day of solitude and silence, Harrison was spotted with his mother just outside the doors to Buckingham Palace, trying to return home to Kensington. It was such a brief snapshot, a total of three incredibly blurry photos resulting from it. His face was slack, and he was mid-conversation with his mother, not paying any of the cameras any attention. He looked okay, but it's hard to tell from so far away.

Caleb is almost jealous of Harrison's ability to just ignore them.

Reporters have been clawing at the White House gates for a total of four days now. They are leaving for London tomorrow morning before sunrise, and the American people are growing restless as they go yet another day without any formal statement from President Chapman, or Caleb, for that matter. They knew better than to speak prior to a contract, though. They would like to avoid as much legal trouble as possible from the royal family. Caleb knows damned well they're already in over their heads with lawyers. The Americans had a team of six lawyers coming with them to London, as well as an assigned mediator, but Caleb can only imagine what the Queen would present them with, too.

His bedroom faces out toward the street. For four days straight, the

street has been flooded with protests both for and against him. Protestors saying he needs to be removed from any governmental building immediately, that his father deserves to be impeached for traitorous activity from his own son, as well as protestors that call out the American people, and especially Caleb's father on his homophobia. Perhaps President Chapman hasn't spoken since Caleb was outed, but his political history is less than kind to the LGBTQ+ community, and the progressives were pissed. They demanded public apologies and policy change, for President Chapman to pull out of defunding different LGBTQ+ resources. Caleb knew nothing would come of their outrage. He knew his father would rather die than admit he was wrong .

Caleb was unsettled by all the noise that was constantly right outside his window, knowing he was the source of all this trouble. He didn't want to hurt anyone. He just wanted to be happy.

He hasn't spoken to anyone since the day everything leaked. That night, after his fight with his father, Diya did, eventually, get through to him. Turns out, the slices in his palms weren't as thin and simple as he thought. Six stitches in his right palm, and two along the muscle on the outside of his left hand, and a regular salve to stray away any infection from his lip. The on-site doctor had to patch him up-- Colonel Peterson, a former US Army-man and current White House physician, also known as Caleb's worst nightmare. He has come face to face with Colonel Peterson perhaps four times, all of which were for mandatory check ups and one vaccination. Caleb toughed out the stitches with minimal complaining, but Mom wept out quiet apologies, and Diya watched with tear-filled eyes as Peterson cleaned the blood from his hands, arms, and lip, stitching him up accordingly. Both of them felt responsible for his pain and injury, but Caleb couldn't help but despise himself. He caused this trouble. He started it all.

Mom and Diya both tried to talk to him that night. Mom wanted to be a comfort, wanted to be Mom again. Diya just wanted to see life return to Caleb's face. Neither were successful, and eventually left him to sleep it all off. He didn't lose enough blood to be all that concerned, but he was still physically exhausted.

Four days later, one day prior to the meeting, Caleb is panicking.

Tomorrow is what will destroy him. He just knows it. A meeting with his family and the royal family sounds like his own personal hell. Having to sign NDAs and negotiate a relationship that Harrison already ended sounds nauseating. Being sat in the same room as

Harrison, with or without this drama, is both exactly what he needed and the last thing he wanted. He dreaded tomorrow for several reasons, but he thinks what ached the most was knowing that, after all the trouble of splitting up, they still got hurt in the end.

He checks his phone at 5PM, hopeful to find a text. Nothing comes.

He swallows his pain and lets it sink into his stomach. His head drops into his arms. He's losing his mind with nothing to do, but lord knows he's not safe anywhere in this house other than this bedroom, either. He can't do much with one of his hands pretty out of commission, too. Still, he lives with the consequences of his actions, and tries his best to do what should be "normal". School is out for the semester, and winter classes don't start until January, and he can't talk to Harrison, so... Normal is just… sitting here? Scrolling through the Twitter trends that want him dead? Watching his life implode before his very eyes?

He's losing his mind.

"Have you eaten dinner yet?" Quinn asks from his doorway, watching Caleb mope at his desk. Caleb hums in response. "I'll take that as a no. Luckily, I brought food."

Caleb sits up in his seat and swivels to face his best friend. He hasn't seen Quinn since Thanksgiving, and while he wasn't purposefully avoiding his texts, he knows he has a good amount of notifications piled up on his phone from him. He takes the plate Quinn brought him, murmuring a quiet thank you despite not being hungry in the slightest. Caleb hadn't managed much more than a handful of crackers over the past few days. Quinn plops down on Caleb's bed, casually scrolling through his phone and eating a fork-full of rice.

"Doin' okay?" Quinn asks simply, not lifting his eyes from his phone.

"I've been better," Caleb admits in a whisper. Quinn nods slowly. "You gonna yell at me too?"

"No," Quinn responds simply. "Just hanging out with you. Because you're my best friend, and I love you, and wanna spend time with you."

"I've been a bit of a shitty friend, if you haven't noticed," Caleb huffs, stabbing a chunk of chicken and taking a bite. Texturally, it tastes like sand, but he's also been in the midst of an ongoing panic attack for four days now, so everything tastes like sand. Gritty, and tasteless, and choking him. "You don't have to keep me company. I know I'm a bit

of a walking nightmare right now."

"I don't have any other friends, so you're stuck with me. Sorry, buddy," Quinn jokes. Caleb offers a half smile in payment.

"Annika took her Dad's side?" Caleb asks, already knowing the answer. Quinn's smile fell. "Got it."

"She just needs a cover until-"

"She's twenty three years old and lives on her own. She doesn't need shit from her father but political vantage," Caleb argues. "And anyone who is willing to sink that low to climb the social ladder can't be the biggest ally anyways."

Quinn doesn't know what to say, so he doesn't say anything. The two of them just sit there in conjoined silence, eating a dinner they didn't want, and stressing about inevitable broken futures.

"Your dad will kill you if he sees you with me."

"I don't care," Quinn deadpans. "You're more important."

"You seem to be the only one who thinks so," Caleb scoffs, sliding the plate away. "We're all meeting tomorrow at Kensington to figure out what… what comes next. What they wanna do."

"What do you want to do?" Quinn quizzes. Caleb's attention flickers toward his friend, confused. "If it was your choice… what would you choose?"

"I don't… I don't think there is a choice," Caleb responds, frowning. "I just… I just am. I'm… I'm going to be the same me after as I was before. People just… people know now."

"Okay," Quinn shrugs. "Date Harrison then."

"It's not that simple."

"Yes it is," Quinn scoffs. Caleb goes to argue, but Quinn continues. "You've sacrificed it all already. Him too. At this point, there is nothing left to lose but your potential. If you give up… who does that benefit?"

"If it's safer-"

"Nothing is safer ," Quinn shot back. "You're out now. Maybe…

maybe you were ripped from the closet by some crazy fucking tornado, but you're *out* . There's no going back in. At this point, it's choosing between where you were and where you will be ."

"Did you take a poetry class this semester?" Caleb asks. Quinn scoffs out a laugh, shaking his head. "Seriously. You're this whole… comp-sci geek. Where did the fucking… poetic romanticism come from?"

"Get out of here, man," Quinn rolls his eyes. "I try to be a good friend once and you make fun of me?"

"Because it's fucking weird, man," Caleb insists. "I'm-I'm used to you busting through the door with a handle of vodka whenever something goes slightly wrong, and instead you've decided to take an actually helpful approach. It's weird."

"Consider it an olive branch," Quinn laughs. "Let's meet in the middle of… of chaos and kindness."

"Chaos and kindness?" Caleb cracks a stupid grin, a grin no one has seen in a little over a month. Quinn is flooded with relief at the sight. "Fine. Deal."

"Awesome. Now that that's out of the way," Quinn stands. "We're gonna drink. Let's get started on the chaos."

"You are ridiculous," Caleb laughs, letting Quinn drag him out of his room for the first time in days. The surge of panic is safely guarded by Quinn's presence, keeping up his energy, keeping up his chaos.

They find Caleb's little siblings in the bowling alley with Diya. Diya was drinking a glass of wine, trying to unwind from one of the worst weeks of her career. While Caleb plops onto the couch with Danny and Diya, Quinn digs through the mini fridge for a couple beers.

Diya looks at Caleb, eyebrows raised and a small smile. She squeezes his shoulder and sips down more wine, cheering as Eleanor gets a perfect strike. Quinn thrusts a bottle into Caleb's hand.

"We drinking to celebrate or forget?" Diya asks.

"Little bit of both?" Quinn suggests, eyeing Caleb for permission.

Caleb nods, cracking the cap off. Eleanor shot her attention over her shoulder, flooded with relief at the sight of her brother. She hasn't seen him since before the photos leaked, since before he fought with

Dad, and got dragged through the biggest scandal the world has ever seen.

“Cheers to that,” Diya tips her glass toward Caleb, who met her in the middle with a soft clink . “Danny, Ellie, you guys grab a rootbeer. Get in on this.”

“Gladly,” Eleanor says, diving over the couch to get to the fridge, too. She grabs two bottles of IBC for herself and Danny. She promptly plops at his side, leaning against his chest and withholding the tears of relief. “To Caleb, and his shitty life decisions.”

“Aye,” Caleb nudges her. “Watch your mouth.”

“To poor life decisions,” Danny chimes in, too. Caleb groans, but met them all for a stupid conjoining of glasses. To shitty life decisions, in the past, present, and future. Here’s to many more.

Harrison is running on approximately three hours of sleep, four shots of espresso, a slice of toast, and sheer spite.

He watches through Twitter livestreams on his laptop as the Chapmans board their flight to England. He’s been awake all night, stressing over what was to come, what he could possibly say to make any of this better. There was small consolation in the footage of Caleb, though, walking to his jet, hands stuffed deep into his pockets, Diya at his side and shielding him from reporters. The video shows them shouting some rather horrific questions at him, but either he doesn’t pay them any attention, or he doesn’t care. Harrison hopes for the latter, but something tells him their words cut deep. He can hardly see Caleb’s face in any of the clips. He kept his head down, sunglasses on, and behind Diya, but his posture alone was concerning.

Harrison is dreadfully uncertain of what will come when they land in London. He knows that the media has already connected the dots, and knows they are coming to England. The world knows that something is happening, but no one is certain what. Not even the people who should know most. Everyone is on the edge of their seat.

Harrison cannot wait to be close to Caleb. No matter what Caleb thinks, what he feels, what he wants to do, Harrison needs to be near him. To hear Caleb’s breath, and his thumping heart, and false promises that things were okay. None of this was okay, but they could make it okay.

Kate helped pick his outfit. She sat on his sofa in his bedroom and either nodded or shook her head at the different button downs and jackets. They settle on a deep royal blue jacket and slacks with a cream button down. She tries to distract him from the swarming anxiety and uncertainty of where today will end. It's not very successful, but he would much rather have her there than not.

When the Americans arrive at Kensington Palace, they are met with intense security. They are searched once through the doors, thorough pat downs and emptying their pockets. Caleb's parents and Diya go through first, meaning all of them are staring as they search Caleb. He hates being anywhere near his father, but this moment was particularly mortifying. His father is staring him down as if he wishes he were dead. As if Dad wanted to kill him himself. Even with the bacitracin and makeup that mostly hid his split lip, the soft throb reminded Caleb to be on his best behavior.

"We're going to be in a meeting room on the second floor," Madame Montgomery announces, a padfolio tucked under her arm, her eyes darkened by exhaustion and stress. "In that room you will meet with some of our top security and staff. Queen Helena, the Duchess of Wales, and Prince Harrison will be in shortly. Please, follow me."

Dad looks over his shoulder at Caleb, who is barely holding it together, barely keeping his breath.

"Keep your fuckin' hands to yourself," his father whispers. "You sit next to us. And you keep your mouth shut. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Caleb nods once, still not looking at him.

Madame Montgomery glances over her shoulder, eyes softening at the sight of a boy who was typically so smiley, so bubbly, and full of life, now drained of everything. Her hatred for the American president only grows. She looks to her long time friend, but Diya was too concerned with Caleb to look back.

Harrison and Euphemia receive notice that the Americans arrived only a few minutes later. They wait just outside the meeting room. He can hear soft murmuring on the other side of the door. Mum is with him, fluffing his waves and curls with a tired smile.

"No matter what happens in there," she whispers. "I am at your side. And I love you. And I will follow your lead, wherever you take us." Harrison nods, taking a shaky breath.

Gran comes down the hall, lined by staff. Harrison and his mother step aside to allow her first entrance. They flood in afterwards. The Americans were already inside, waiting rather impatiently, stood behind their chairs out of respect despite hating being there.

Harrison finds Caleb instantly amongst the crowd, like he was the sun. Caleb was looking at the floor, biting his cheek, on the opposite side of the room. Harrison has never seen him so still, so calm. He wants Caleb to look at him. Correction: he needs Caleb to look at him. He needs to see his bright eyes and pretty smile. He needs to see him exist.

“You may sit,” Queen Helena announces simply, taking her own seat.

The room shuffles for their respective chairs. Harrison sits directly to his grandmother’s left, his hands folded on the table, and his posture pristine, a lawyer on his other side. He wastes a glance at Caleb's father. Andrew Chapman was sat tense shouldered, elbows planted on the table, a scowl etched permanently into his face. Caleb’s reluctance to look anywhere but down made more sense. Harrison would be scared of that scowl, too.

If he knew telepathy, he would get into Caleb’s head and whisper a million apologies, promising it would all work out. But instead, he can only think about it, and pray that they would talk before the day is over.

Harrison doesn’t pay attention to so much as a minute of conversation. It’s mostly just his grandmother speaking, and President Chapman trying his damned hardest (and failing) to be polite in his rebuttals. The lawyers are typing quickly as they speak, auditing the conversation closely as they start to formulate a contract.

“We need to start with a preliminary contract first,” Gran says simply, interrupting their conversation before it goes too far. “I fear we will get nowhere without Harrison or Caleb’s input on-“

“Caleb has no input,” President Chapman interrupts. Gran’s anger flares, looking between the president, then Harrison, as if to say *this is the people you chose?* Harrison wants to punch the president in the mouth, too. “My word is his word.”

“That’s not how law works, Mr. Chapman,” Gran says back, an edge to her voice, steadily looking away from Harrison and back to her opponent. “I ask that you don’t speak over me if you wish to have any say whatsoever. You’re in my country, you follow my orders. Am I

understood?”

Finally, Caleb glances up. Fearful, he looks to Queen Helena, then Harrison, only to find that Harrison was already looking at him. He swiftly darts his attention away before his father catches him. Too late, President Chapman was already glaring at his son.

They are an entire room away, and Caleb felt every inch of separation.

They sit at opposite corners of the same table. Caleb keeps his eyes trained on the dense wood grain, the way it felt so smoothed and polished under his finger tips, letting the conversation between lawyers pass him by. He didn’t have a say in the first contract. He won’t have any say in any of it. It’s all common sense.

Within another thirty minutes, a thick contract is placed in front of both him and Harrison. It was a customary legal document, non-negotiable. The same one that they have to sign any time any of the first family start dating, the same one they have to sign whenever someone in the monarchy gets involved with someone. NDAs, and all types of information, from vaccination status, to blood type, to Caleb’s drivers license number. The air is tense. None of them needed to be there for this part aside from Harrison, Caleb, and the notary. It would be the meeting that followed that their full presence was required. It was the meeting that followed that they both fear as much as they do.

Caleb signs the documents he had to sign. He can feel his father glaring daggers as he does. It’s not like he had much of a choice. It was either that, or be arrested. Or maybe have a hit put on his head, just for the safety of the crown’s secrets. That is, if you consider the detailed knowledge of the Prince’s body and taste of his tongue as the crown’s secrets. Dad wants Caleb dead with every curl of the C’s in his name. If he had the choice, Caleb’s father would strip Caleb of everything he had, down to the last name that should have never belonged to him in the first place.

Harrison signs his packet, too. He isn’t as shy in his signature, as soft in his grip of the pen. He signs them all, slamming his pen with each punctuation, pushing them forward with a forced smile toward the White House legal team, and thus, the President of the United States. If Andrew Chapman’s look of disdain toward his son was angry, he must have been murderous looking at Harrison. The prince just smiles back, hands folded, and waiting impatiently. While Gran was not fond of any of this, she did enjoy the mischief on Harrison’s face. If there

was anyone who deserved the annoyance, it was the President of the United States.

Caleb's hands shook with every signature, and the stitches pulled when he held the pen. But he signed every paper. Diya pushes it forward to the British legal team, then rests her hand on Caleb's arm. Both sets of lawyers look at every signature and set of initials to make sure no one gets fucked over. The mediator reviews both sets of documents, too. It's a tense silence. He stalls on a couple pages, murmuring something to the legal teams, then continues. Finally, he sets the documents on top of one another and nods.

"I think that should be all for the customary documents. I suggest we adjourn. Thirty minutes sound like enough, your majesty?"

"Yes. Thank you," Queen Helena nods, standing first. "Disperse as you please. Return to this table no later than 6:00 PM."

Caleb watches as the rest of the table stands and moves about. Euphemia moves directly toward Harrison, hand resting on his shoulder, leaning down to whisper in his ear. Dad stands for water. Caleb takes this as his opportunity to skirt away. He needed a breath of air outside of this room. Away from the dust, and his father's scowl, and the dozens of eyes on him. He needs a moment.

"Where are you going?" Dad asks in a whispered malice. Deer caught in the headlights, Caleb looked up at his father timidly.

"Andrew," Mom says sharply at her husband, catching the attention of Harrison, his mother, and the Queen. Dad looked equally as murderous toward Mom as he did his son. "Go on, sweetheart. Take a second."

"Thank you," Caleb whispers, barely keeping himself together as he escaped the room.

On the other side of the table, Harrison stands with his mother and grandmother, watching closely, ready to step in if needed.

"This is the family you've chosen?" Gran asks with a scowl, eyeing the president.

"Not the family," Harrison denies. "Just him."

"He's drowning in there, Helena," Euphemia whispers to her mother in law. "They're bleeding him dry. Something is very wrong."

Gran sighs, running a hand over her face and watching Caleb slip out of the room. She finally rests her eyes on Harrison and nods.

“Go. Make sure he’s okay,” Gran instructs.

“Thank you,” Harrison nearly melts from sheer relief. “I’ll be quick.”

He looks both ways when he exits the meeting room. He has no clue where Caleb disappeared to. He takes a guess and starts toward a bathroom down the right side of the hall. He knocks gently.

“Caleb?” Harrison calls out, carefully slipping into the room.

Caleb’s back is to him, leaning his hands into the granite countertop. Caleb sobs silently over the sink. Harrison doesn’t know what he’s going to do next, what he’ll say, or how he can fix any of this. He doesn’t know what their plan is. He hasn’t spoken to Caleb in days. It’s been over a month since they spoke of their relationship. Caleb’s father will kill them both if they try to move forward with anything other than a cold cut off.

Caleb’s head hung from his shoulders, feeling like a bowling ball hung from his neck. Big breath in. Long exhale out. It will be fine. He needs another moment to pull himself together. He can’t be like this around Harrison. He can’t be around Harrison.

Harrison’s hand touches his elbow. Caleb flinches on instinct.

“Hey…” Harrison frowns, his touch delicately tracing his forearm over his sleeve, brushing across his exposed wrist at the base of his sleeve. He doesn’t like having Caleb flinch from him. He doesn’t like seeing him so scared. “It’s going to be alright.”

Caleb nods rapidly, still incapable of making eye contact, of looking at him. He doesn’t want Harrison to see what was made of him since Halloween, what happened since they were outed, how much he’s devolved. Harrison gently pulls on his arm, directing Caleb to turn and face him. He gives in.

Harrison surveys Caleb closely. Every inch of his face, every tear that raced down his cheek. Harrison’s thumb trembles as he ran it gently over the covered-up split. Caleb closed his eyes and rested his face in Harrison’s palm. His eyes had become so dark and heavy by exhaustion and stress. Caleb hadn’t stopped shaking. Harrison, neither.

“What did he do to you, love?” Harrison whispers. Caleb choked on a tragic sound he desperately tried to hold back. “C’mere. It’s alright.”

Caleb lets his head fall into Harrison’s shoulder, arm looped around his waist, holding him close. He took a deep breath in, smelling the lavender on Harrison’s jacket, and the hint of old cologne from the last time Harrison put it on. His eyes screwed shut, and he squeezed Harrison even closer, if possible. A month and a half. It’s been a month and a half without him, and Caleb couldn’t imagine letting go again.

“What happened?” Harrison asks in a mumbled whisper, pulling back to look at him again.

Harrison’s hand gently brushes across Caleb’s pink cheeks and frown lines, watching Caleb’s glassy eyes. He’s been fighting too long. He needs a break. He doesn’t take his eyes off Caleb’s face, his chewed-raw and healing lips, and the clumpy eyelashes from excessive crying. A thumb brushes an old scar on Caleb’s chin before releasing his face. He slid his hand into Caleb’s, only then feeling the padded bandage of his palm. Instantly, he shed his gaze down, aghast at the sight of cut up hands, with his right palm being bandaged in pretty thick gauze. How he hadn’t noticed earlier when they were signing papers, he’s unsure.

“He did all this?” Harrison immediately retracts and cradles his hand carefully, studying the professional bandaging and taping over a variety of injuries. On his left hand, there’s two exposed stitches down the side of his hand, the muscle below his pinky.

“Dad and I fought when the leak dropped,” Caleb sniffles, wincing at Harrison’s careful analysis. “Turns out, glass is sharp.” He gives a pathetic smile in hopes to ease Harrison’s worry. It doesn’t help. At all. “I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not,” Harrison frowns, carefully pressing up his sleeve to review as much of his skin as possible. He’s relieved to see the wounds stop on his hands. “I-I told them you weren’t safe. I *told them* we needed to-to help you. To get you the hell out of there. No one listened to me.”

“I’m okay,” he says again, twisting out of Harrison’s grip slowly. He winds his arms around himself, protecting his body and his soul. He doesn’t want to hurt any more than he already does. Harrison’s shoulders fall. Caleb’s stance resembles that of his father’s. Cold.

Closed off. “What the hell are we doing, Harrison?”

A beat of silence. Eye contact that goes unbroken, the first time in months. They’re both scared. Both want to slip back into the depths of their walk-in closets and never come out, never be seen again. Harrison is scared, but if anything, he’s more scared for Caleb and his safety.

“I don’t know,” Harrison admits. He swallows the lump in his throat and considers his actions over the past several months. Part of him fears his act of rebellion was just that-- rebellion. That they were going through all this for nothing. But Caleb’s eyes are captivating, even in shitty bathroom lighting, even when glassy and bloodshot. He wants to spend the rest of eternity looking at them. And Caleb has the kindest touch, even after the most hellish week of his life. His fingertips still slot over Harrison’s ribs like puzzle pieces, his head just the right weight on Harrison’s shoulder. And his heart is the epitome of good.

Harrison pictures his father, young as Harrison is now, chasing after a girl no one wanted him to have. She was divorced, poor, and from eastern Europe. Her first language wasn’t English, and it was untraditional. Harrison is no different. He diverges from normalcy, and he doesn’t care if it crashes and burns eventually. So long as he still has today, he still has a chance.

They can hear chatter pass in the hallway outside the door. Caleb tenses at the sound of American voices, holding his breath and squeezing his arms tighter around himself.

“I want to do this,” Harrison finally admits in a whisper. “If you do.”

“You didn’t before.”

“Because I thought I could save us this trouble before,” Harrison frowns. “I… I wanted to avoid all this. Keep you safe, and-and preferably, not lose track of our futures. But we’re here now.”

“We are,” Caleb nods, looking to the floor again.

“We’re here now. I-I’m not doing all this for nothing, Caleb,” Harrison says simply. “I fought tooth and nail to get this meeting. My grandmother was ready to have me hanged in the middle of Trafalgar Square. I-I think it would be stupid to waste our only chance.”

“You want to do all this?” Caleb asks finally. Harrison nods, looking

up at him with those doe eyes that always make Caleb soft. He was scared of what Caleb wanted. Scared of the difference in thoughts. Scared of being alone again. But he'll do it. Whatever Caleb wants, he'll do it. "Because if not, we need to decide now. Before we get pulled into a major PR event, or-or another contract that says you're stuck with me for the next however many years, or- I don't know. I don't- I've never done any of this before." Caleb sniffles, feeling the panic rise in his chest again. "I've-I've never really done the relationship thing, especially not since I got put in front of my entire country to pick apart. And I am incredibly difficult to tolerate, if my friends and family haven't made that abundantly clear. I'm-I'm not the kind of person that people just fall in love with-"

"Yes, you are," Harrison argues.

"And stay in love with," Caleb finishes. "You've already gotten away, Harrison. You've already saved yourself the trouble. You don't have to-"

" *I want to,* " Harrison shot back. "I have seen all the people out there. I've seen them all. And none of them, not one, holds a candle to you." Harrison moves, dipping into Caleb's line of sight. He's hating this whole no eye contact thing. "I have never loved like this. I've never had someone last like this. And no, it's not easy, but I love loving you. I love it."

Last like this plays again, and again, and again in Caleb's mind. They haven't even been together that long. Just long enough to get attached. Just long enough for it to hurt.

"You can make the final decision. Your call. I won't-- I won't make you do anything you don't want to do," Harrison declares, gently pulling on Caleb's folded arms, holding his hands. "What do you want? Fuck what your Dad thinks, or your siblings. Fuck them all. What do you want?"

"To be me," Caleb whispers, voice crackling. "To-to go to college parties, and text my friends, and-and kiss my unofficial-but-official boyfriend in my backyard without worrying if I was about to get outed to the entire world." Harrison nods, smiling as he rambles. "And I want to be in love with you, and-and not worry what Dad will say or do, and not be scared of the world. Because I am. I love you. And I'm scared of it all. Loving you isn't hard but it's scary ."

Harrison nods, carefully pulling Caleb toward himself. Caleb watches

Harrison's nimble fingers gently slide against his own, make a home in Caleb's hand, piece their lives together like the most unnecessarily complicated puzzle, modge-podge it, and frame the picture. He slowly guides Caleb close again, hand in hand, his remaining one gently sliding across the back of Caleb's neck, twisting and fluffing his hair at the base of his head.

"I love you," Harrison whispers. Caleb's fear-filled expression disappears, replaced by a relieved, tired smile. "We can be scared together."

"You think?" Caleb shifts his stance again, letting Harrison pull their foreheads together, their noses brushing. "Are you willing to face my Dad?"

"Long as you're willing to face my grandmother," Harrison murmurs back. Caleb nods. "Okay. We're doing it then."

"We are," Caleb confirms softly. "This meeting will be a nightmare."

"We'll get through it," Harrison insists. Caleb doesn't seem all too comforted.

Harrison leaves a gentle kiss to the corner of his mouth. It felt odd, going for a full one right now. Like the wrong time and place. Caleb settled easily for any kind of action that included Harrison's lips against him, any returned affection after a month-long hiatus. Caleb holds on as long as humanly possible. Harrison presses careful kisses to his cheek, more soft whispers of affection they've missed out on the past few months.

They return to the meeting room one at a time. Harrison goes first, with a parting promise that they will be okay. This time, Caleb tries to believe him.

Harrison slips back into the room, sliding up to his mother's side. Euphemia was discussing with President Chapman about something other than the present drama-- something about prior events they have seen one another at.

"Hi lovey," Mum greets, smiling. She carefully adjusts her son's collar, brushing a hand over his back and pushing his hair out of his eyes. None of them looked messy, it was just a habit to perfect any tiny misplacements. "Harrison, darling, when is the last time you were formally introduced to President Chapman?"

“It’s been a few years,” Harrison feigns a smile. The door opens, Caleb joining the room again. President Chapman immediately looks to his son. Harrison too. Caleb caught Harrison’s eye, giving a small nod. “How are you, Mr. President?” Euphemia tries to shield her humorous smirk as Harrison happily jabs at the sitting president.

“I’ve been better,” he admits, shifting, uncomfortable under Harrison’s stare. He looks around, and his attention lands on Caleb. “Caleb.”

Harrison grits his teeth at the ice to his agency. He bites his tongue, tipping his chin up, raising an eyebrow. He’s ready to snap should he take it too far, ready to step in and protect Caleb from any further stabs through the heart.

“Yeah?” Caleb’s voice hitches slightly, keeping his attention on something else, hoping Dad would assume he was busy.

“You’re being rude. Come over here. We’ve spoken about eye contact before.” It takes plenty of physical restraint to keep Harrison from barking back at the politician. Euphemia rests a hand on his elbow, a gentle reminder to hold his temper. Caleb nods, putting on an attempt at a smile as he joins the three. Dad looked murderous as Caleb joined them. “We were discussing prior events, and she reminded me of… what was it again?”

“Wimbledon,” Euphemia hums. “You boys had such a rivalry back then. We couldn’t get you in the same room without starting some kind of fire.” Harrison couldn’t help the small smile that crosses his face, his anger fading at the idea of a day when he despised the man he now loves. He used to hate Caleb with all his heart, and now he loves him with all his soul. Caleb catches his eye and blushes. “Ironic how it all worked out, isn’t it?”

“The rivalry was one hell of a stirrup, huh, Caleb?” Dad jabs. Caleb would give anything to be anywhere else right now. He looks between the three of them, taking a subtle step closer to Harrison. “Like the Duchess said, it’s ironic how, no matter the circumstances, you’re always creating a mess of the media.” Harrison rolls his eyes, raising his eyebrows at his mother, as if asking for permission. He’s no longer hiding his annoyance. She nods at him, releasing his elbow.

“I think I’m going to get my water,” Caleb said decisively, slowly backing away. “Does anyone need anything?”

“Oh, come on now,” Dad insists. “Caleb-“

“I don’t know about you, but the British press has been surprisingly okay with it all,” Harrison intervenes. “Slight backlash, and of course the Tory party is unpleasant, but it’s miraculous how a more progressive political climate leads to a more positive response in the public. Feels like a sign, you know? Treating people with humanity really makes a big difference.”

“Excuse you?” President Chapman is taken aback by the sudden quip.

“No, please,” Harrison smiles back. President Chapman’s attention shot to Caleb again. Caleb moves another step closer to Harrison. Not-so-subtly, Harrison rests his hand on Caleb’s lower back. “I actually do have to step away. It’s nice to chat with you again, Andrew. See you at the table.”

Harrison takes a step away and toward the table, Caleb following directly on his heels. Caleb grabs his bottle of water, uncapping it and taking a sip, obsessively checking over Harrison’s shoulder.

“You’re ballsy,” Caleb mutters with a nervous smile.

“Listen, I love you- *I love you* - but your father is a prick,” Harrison says, shaking his head with an amused smile. “I was ready to punch him in the mouth.”

“He’s pretty terrible,” Caleb confirms, taking another gulp of water. His shaking was prevalent. Harrison leans against one of the chairs, standing across from him, just barely blocking Caleb’s view of their parents.

“Is he always like that?”

“Pretty much.”

Harrison spares a glance over his shoulder at the man he would have to get accustomed to standing near, who he will inevitably be stuck at plenty of dinners and events with.

“And you wonder why we can’t stand Americans,” Harrison scoffs, grazing his fingertips over Caleb’s white knuckles.

“Well, I hope I’m worth the trouble,” Caleb responds, voice hushed to remain private, as if he still had to sneak around the idea of being anything more than work acquaintances. They are literally at a meeting about an international sex scandal, with the two of them as the perpetrators, but it still felt personal, and secret.

“Are you kidding?” Harrison cracks a small smirk. Caleb didn’t realize Harrison was holding his hand again until then. He doesn’t remember when that happened, and who initiated it. It felt only natural. “I’m starting to think I’ve had it easy so far. I’d do it all again if it meant getting to do this.” Harrison delivers a small squeeze to his fingers. Caleb starts feeling a little lighter.

Euphemia catches Harrison’s eye, raising an eyebrow. Harrison gives her a small nod, directing her attention toward Caleb’s hands. She pursed her lips and side steps out of the room.

“What’s going on?” Caleb asks softly, watching the door Euphemia just exited through. “The meeting is supposed to resume in a minute.”

“Everything is fine,” Harrison reassures. “Just… making sure it all works out.”

Queen Helena returned to the conference room, followed by Euphemia, less than five minutes later. They both made eye contact with Harrison before taking their seats at the head of the table. Everyone slowly filters toward their places.

“Caleb, I would like you to sit over here this time,” Queen Helena states, gesturing to the seat where a lawyer once sat, directly to Harrison’s left. The room is quiet at her sudden request. Harrison adjusts how he sat, shooting a confident smile over at the sitting president of the United States and his wife. Caleb’s eyes go wide, looking to his father first, then to the queen.

“Are you sure?” Caleb asks softly. His voice shakes with nerves. Euphemia’s hand clenches into a fist. Queen Helena juts out her jaw. “Yes, ma’am…”

Relocated, Caleb settles in the seat beside Harrison. Harrison nudges his foot under the table, giving him a short, confident nod. Caleb tried to feel confident, too. It was pretty damn tough.

It’s a lot of similar stuff that they spoke on before, stuff they discussed in the last meeting. National security for both parties, how to properly ensure they are ethically funding any kind of trips to and from one another’s countries, the requirements in charity events and such, how the royal family stands politically (spoiler: they don’t. They’ve learned since Harrison’s father). They ask Caleb if he plans to go into politics, which earns some rather intense glares from the other side of the table when he says no.

“One of my primary concerns lies in the line of succession,” Queen Helena states, looking at Harrison specifically. Caleb has an uncomfortable stir in his gut. “Your sister chose to abdicate preemptively. I’m sure she’s already discussed this with you?” Harrison nods once. Caleb furrows his eyebrows, looking at Harrison with a racing heart. This was new information to him. “She was next in line. Her and her children. But she chose to remove the remainder of her bloodline from any royal duties. So the responsibility falls on you. I am curious to know what your plan is when I am gone, and the crown is upon your head. It’s a future that only creeps closer.”

Caleb also looks at Harrison. This wasn’t necessarily any kind of question he could answer for Harrison. This wasn’t anything he had an opinion on, anything he could say or do something about. The prospect of his partner rising to the throne is horrific. Sure, Harrison will be in history books regardless. Harrison will go down in history as the first outwardly queer royal family member. But King ...

“I don’t see what makes me any different from my sister,” Harrison says in response, posture straightened, head high. Very regal. Caleb admires his ability to speak under such immense pressure. “Josephine wasn’t questioned on her ability to lead before she chose to abdicate. Gran, I understand your concern for tradition, and I understand we have grown to fear the tabloids, but I assure you our bloodline won’t die with me, and I certainly won’t be an ineffective king just because I’m in love with a man. To believe otherwise would be arrogant, seeing as every Queen prior to you had also been in a relationship with one.”

“So you have no qualms in disturbing the peace of our traditions?” Helena asks her grandson. Caleb was unsure how they were meant to take that. She said it with heart, but the statement was cold. “Harrison, you never fail to remind me of your father.”

Instinctively, Harrison reaches for Caleb’s hand. Caleb squeezes gently, trying to protect him from that which always finds a way to hurt him. A weakness Harrison was not proud of. Caleb wanted to jump in and defend him. Harrison was nothing like his father. Harrison loved, smiled, and cared. But then he remembers he’s facing not just Harrison’s grandmother, but Late Prince Charles’s mother. Few will recall the true life of Prince Charles like she will.

“When he was young, maybe between the ages of 10 to 25, he was not fond of our traditions. He broke every rule we had, and was the reason we instated more. He was trouble, a young man with a death

grip on freedom and the funds of a prince. He was a stubborn man, who clawed his way through life with no desire to uphold traditional values. It was only a falling out with Arthur that even made him decide he wanted children, years after his first wife passed. One of the few traditional values he ever made an attempt at was continuing his lineage. His only attempt at tradition was you three."

As always, Harrison was enthralled, hearing a story about his father, about the person, and not the historical figure. Not the war criminal, or the terribly political man, or the man that made Harrison feel guilty for being alive, but the person who gave him life in the first place.

"I feared he would take down the monarchy by hand if it meant having his own free will. It was with him that I realized it's best to not stand in a boy's way when they have their mind set to something." Queen Helena's eyes flicker to Caleb, the warm love of a grandmother replaced by the cruel stare of a monarch. She has rather pretty brown eyes, very similar to Harrison's. Caleb can only hope that, one day, she won't look at him with malice. "If your mind is set to an American, to a man , to someone that has broken more of our etiquette rules than I knew possible, then don't let me stand in your way. But I pray that you don't stray too far from the path, for our road has already been paved, and is far easier to traverse. Do you understand?" She looks at Harrison again. Harrison is considering her words carefully. "I'm telling you… be happy. And be in love. But I see it best that you don't drift too far from our traditional values, for your sake, and for the crown."

"Understood," Harrison confirms. "Thank you."

"You are quite welcome, dear," she turns her gaze onto Caleb again. "Caleb, do me a favor."

"Yes, ma'am," Caleb nods, eager to do just about anything if it meant they were given the go-ahead. If it meant he could sleep tonight.

"If you're going to love my grandson, you need to make me a promise. Swear to it, that you will not be the same man that your father is."

Caleb has to suppress a smile, knowing his father was at the other end of the table, ready to throw a fit. Harrison squeezes his hand under the table.

"Yes, ma'am," he confirms. "Swear it."

"I believe you," she sighs, looking across the table. "President

Chapman, I will not be asking for you to speak on this matter. Your thoughts on your son and my grandson were made perfectly clear throughout your political history as well as the state of your child. Your sloppy job at covering up abuse does not bode well in my home. I don't seek your approval, and quite frankly, neither should they. Your presence was mandatory for contractual reasons. You are free to leave."

The room disperses after Queen Helena stands, releasing them all. Caleb lets out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, barely withholding tears. Harrison looks at him, breaking out into the grandest of smiles. Caleb matches it, scanning Harrison's face. He is struggling to believe it. They survived. They're gonna make it.

"We're doing this," Harrison smiles.

"We are," Caleb murmurs back, voice scratchy, grinning like an idiot. "I missed you."

"C'mere for a second," Harrison chuckles, meeting him halfway. Caleb doesn't think about his parents being in the same room. He doesn't think about the lawyers, about the auditors, about anything but Harrison. He kisses Harrison so gently, and Harrison's fingers ghost over his jawline. "I love you."

"I love you," Caleb whispers back, sniffling again. He pulls back just a few inches to get a good look at Harrison's face. "You're okay?"

"Best I've been in a while," Harrison admits with a tired smile. "You?" Caleb hesitates. Not really. He'll be better now that this side of stuff is done. This present moment is kind of horrifying. This day has sucked. But tomorrow will be the start of a better future.

"I will be," Caleb murmurs back. Harrison nods, pecking his lips again. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being you," Caleb exhales. "For having the heart you do."

"Didn't have much of a choice," Harrison chuckles, propping his chin on his hand, watching with a sweet smile. He holds Caleb's hand carefully in his. Neither can break eye contact, neither can let go. This is a dream. "I love you."

"You missed saying that, huh?" Caleb teases. Harrison nods. "How

many times am I gonna hear that tonight?"

"Easy another two hundred times."

A hand rests on Caleb's back. He jumps, looking over his shoulder, seeing Diya.

"I'm going to try and control your father, steer him out of here without snapping at you," Diya murmurs gently, hovering between the two of them. "You did great today."

"Thank you," Caleb gives a nervous smile. She ruffles his hair.

"We have to deal with the press tomorrow. So rest up tonight. Both of you. I already spoke with Harrietta. We'll be doubling down on you boys. Don't screw us."

"Yes, ma'am," Harrison nods politely. "Thank you for your help."

Diya skirts around the table, sliding up to Caleb's father and directing him out of the room before he could march over and give Caleb a piece of his mind. Harrison and Caleb stand to leave, the room a little less full, a little less intimidating.

"I'm just going to talk to my grandmother for a moment. Hopefully get my phone back while we're at it," Harrison releases his hand. "Wait in the hall for me?"

Caleb nods, parting from his side and stepping out. He stands in total silence with his mother in the hallway, the two sat on a bench just outside the meeting room it all went down in.

Harrison approaches his grandmother. He didn't even have to ask--she was already holding out the cell phone, eyebrows raised. Harrison is hesitant to take it. It felt too easy.

"Go on," Gran nods him forward. He carefully takes it, pocketting it. "I would be a fool to make the same mistake twice. You're the one who showed me that. You should feel proud of yourself… Even if this isn't my desire for you, I know I'm proud of you." Harrison studies her expression, wondering if she was lying, wondering if she was saying this to appease him. To save herself from further backlash. "How injured is he?"

"Couple sutures at least. Hard to tell under the makeup and long sleeves," Harrison admits, wishing he was with Caleb now, wishing he

had more time to analyze every bump and bruise. “I’m not entirely sure. But I’ll keep an eye on it.”

“Good boy,” she nods. “Go on. I know you’re anxious to get a moment alone. You’re free to go.”

“Thank you,” he breaks out in a grin. “Thank you .”

“Go, before I change my mind.”

That night, they both go to bed without dinner. They are far too tired to join yet another inter-family event. They, instead of staying in Kensington, go back to Caleb’s hotel room, eager to get some space away from their families, away from the drama and tension that had a death grip over them.

It was their first time in public since the news broke. They walk from Kensington to the hotel, strolling directly beside one another. Harrison was tempted to hold Caleb’s hand, or loop an arm through his, to be some form of physical presence, but he decides to play it safe. Tomorrow. There's always tomorrow.

They couldn’t fathom the idea of sleeping alone tonight. Caleb didn’t want to let go of Harrison that quickly, and Harrison feared sending Caleb back on his own, without another set of eyes, another witness. Not after Gran had humiliated Caleb’s father in front of so many people. Harrison didn’t trust what repercussions might come of that. Caleb lets them into the hotel room, both kicking their shoes off to the side and hanging their jackets on the chair. Caleb sinks down onto the edge of his bed, digging through his suitcase for something he can sleep in.

“I might take a shower,” Caleb announces in barely a whisper. Harrison nods.

“Good. You stink.”

“Thanks,” Caleb rolls his eyes with a playful smile, throwing a balled-up shirt at Harrison. Harrison caught it, throwing it back. “That was an offer for you to come with, by the way.”

“You know I can’t say no to seeing you without clothes,” Harrison teases.

“You’re an idiot.”

It's such a stupid act of affection, but it feels like tradition for them. Hot showers, their bodies as close as can be. There's little sexual about when they're in the shower. It's just a moment of solitude, a moment of vulnerability, pf safety, and comfort, and touches that don't necessarily center around lust.

Harrison would be lying if he said he wasn't looking at the mild greens, blues, and yellows along Caleb's upper arms and shoulders. He is particularly interested and horrified by a patch of purple on his back between his shoulder blades. It's sore to the touch, he notes, when Caleb has running water hitting that spot. A small patch on his face, too, explaining the split in his lip. Though, it seems to be healing rather swiftly. He also gets a good view of his hands, uncovered by gauze. Two stitches in his left hand, six in his right.

"Writing can't be very fun with that," Harrison murmurs.

"Signing those papers sucked," Caleb half jokes. Harrison chooses to find it humorous, too. "It'll heal. I should have them taken out in another couple days. Just adding another scar to my list."

"You are a hazard," Harrison laughs, making Caleb laugh, too. "Remind me to not stand too close to you. Ever."

"Baby, you are stuck with me. You're shit out of luck."

"Dammit," Harrison curses sarcastically. They laugh more.

The air is brisk when they get out. Caleb helplessly wriggles himself into joggers, a hoodie, and thick socks for warmth, Harrison finding it incredibly hilarious and even more adorable by how this man handles any weather under sixty degrees. These are some of the little things he hadn't gotten the chance to pick up on over their late summer adventures.

Close to 10PM, Harrison pulls out his phone and writes up a simple text. Once the clock strikes 10 BST, or 5EST, he sends the text. Caleb was already asleep, face tucked into Harrison's neck, hands under Harrison's shirt, searching for body heat. It's only a four word text, but Harrison would never intentionally miss his 5PM EST texts. He had to make up for all that he lost.

Just Harrison: I love loving you .

Chapter End Notes

i tweeted like twenty minutes ago “might not post until tomorrow” but i apparently forgot that i pretty much finished editting before my commute home so i had, like, three paragraphs to edit left.

anyways, here’s ch. 20 :) if i had to guess, i’d say we have another 3-5 chapters left before the story is complete. I feel like i layered on so much “hurt” that yall deserve a little bit of time to indulge in some fluff. Still havent decided on if i want the last chapter to be a sweet “no one knows the future” moment or an epilogue. We shall see together.

aight. i gotta wake up at 3:30 am for work tomorrow. i better see my email spammed with comment notifications (/j /lh)

goodnight friends!!!

Chapter 21: We Are

Chapter Summary

> "Nothing is certain" some say. Little do they know, "nothing" is a logical fallacy. There is always the exception.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Late nights spent perusing the depths of Twitter, scrolling through old trends, making mental lists of the former family friends that are no longer trustworthy… Caleb has never hated politics more. He wished to destroy what was left of his shattered and dented phone, drop it into a volcano, and never purchase a new one.

His family returns home to DC without him. He was still trying to figure out what his next step was. It's obvious that the White House wouldn't be an adequate place to call home anymore. Caleb has no qualms with that-- he never considered it home to begin with. But he still needs to find a place to go, somewhere to lay low and wait for it all to pass. He can't hide in the heaps of blankets and Harrison's body forever. Eventually, he will have to step back out. Eventually, he will have to face it all, entirely alone. Harrison won't always be his protector, and his family is a lost cause.

At the start of the second week since the leak dropped, President Chapman makes his statement via press briefing. Caleb knows he shouldn't watch it live. He knows he shouldn't watch it at all. Harrison tries talking him out of it, too. But, in the end, there they sat in Harrison's bedroom, Harrison working from his laptop on something undisclosed, eyeing his anxious partner from his desk, and Caleb on the edge of his seat on Harrison's sofa, watching the briefing.

Eleanor already gave Caleb forewarning over text that it would be unpleasant, that he should mute his notifications online and turn off the TV, perhaps go out on a date night, or hang out with Harrison, Josephine, and Kate before Josephine leaves for Scotland. Her abdication was both perfect and awful timing. Caleb couldn't help but fear what will come when that news breaks in the next few days. Josephine will be moving out by the end of this week, meaning the official notice will go out that same day she makes her venture north.

One catastrophe at a time he reminds himself.

His father strolls up to the podium. Murmurs and noise is summoned from the jam-packed crowd of people. Caleb bites his knuckle, knees bouncing anxiously as Dad greets the American people for the first time in a while. Harrison hears the clearing of President Chapman's throat and instantly ceases his typing, eyes trained on his boyfriend's back. The way his shoulders tensed, and his fidgeting worsens.

"Obviously this past week has been a stir of events and led to significant debate about my competency as President and my involvement in the situation," Andrew acknowledges, staring at his notecards. "I would like to start with the immediate notion that I have had no involvement in so much as a moment of this past week's events. I was unaware of the relationship between my son and Prince Harrison. I was unaware of the photos obtained in my own backyard. I had little say in the decision made when we met in Kensington Palace. I will not accept responsibility for crimes I hadn't committed."

Caleb takes a sharp breath. Harrison frowns. There is no crime to love.

"I would like to make my stance perfectly clear on this matter: I did not approve of relations between my son and the prince. I still don't. I was raised as a respectful child of God, as were my children. It's unfortunate that they made the decision to stray from traditional Christian values that were taught to them. The royal family may welcome them with open arms, but they have no place under my service to the American people. I have urged my son to issue an apology and correct his mistakes, and should he choose to agree, I will happily welcome him back with open arms. It is never too late to correct one's errors."

Heart sinking, Harrison stands and moves to the back of the couch. His hand rests on the middle of Caleb's back. Caleb doesn't react, training his eyes forward on the TV, swallowing the lump in his throat. His bouncing knees, twitchy fingers, they stilled. He was so zoned in on his own father's malice, everything else just… floods away.

His father further details that no government funding was improperly used toward any expenditures between the two, more political ranting on Caleb having *no place in the White House* and being a *shame to the Chapman name* .

He's not sure why he's surprised. Eleanor warned him. He knew it would be bad. He looks to the barely healing wounds in his hands. The stitches have been taken out, leaving just fresh pink scars in their shadow. His lip has fully healed over. His upper back and shoulders are still slightly yellowed from bruising-- Harrison has been keeping an eye on it, fearful of hidden fractures or sprains that Caleb was simply ignoring. Some nights, if Harrison isn't careful, it aches his spine and shoulders to lie there, or prop himself up, and Caleb will murmur a quiet request to move. Harrison hates seeing him hurt.

The floor opens for questions. Caleb grimaces at the slights toward him made by both reporters and his father. Some of the reporters are critical of his conservative and harmful views , and some of them claim abuse that they can't prove. Dad lies through his teeth.

"I have never once laid a hand on my son in a manner that was anything but loving," he insists. "To believe otherwise is simply a false accusation."

They ask him what his plans are-- "what are you going to do with him" and "where is he going to go". Dad insists that Caleb will be able to figure it out on his own. Caleb got himself into the mess, he will clamber himself out of the wreckage. Finally, a reporter asks the question that has been on Caleb's mind since day one of the leak.

"What does the rest of your family think of the leak and their relationship?"

Holding his breath, Caleb prepares for the worst.

"My family and I all came to the same conclusion," Dad insists. "Andrew, Bridgette, Danny, Eleanor, Beatrice… we've all come to the same conclusion. He is alone out there. He is welcomed back to this family once he admits his wrongs and corrects his mistakes."

Caleb lets out a shaky breath, head falling into his hands. And so the blows keep coming. Harrison murmurs soft apologies, whispers that it will be alright, that they will recover. Caleb just stays quiet, just keeps his thoughts to himself. He won't cry if he doesn't acknowledge the pain.

Instantly, he's flooded with texts from family members, insisting it was a lie. Telling him they loved him. Telling him they want him home again. Eleanor texts him the most. As much as he wants to believe them-- as much as he *does* believe them, he knows firsthand how dangerous it was to cross Andrew Chapman Sr. He doesn't want

that fear instilled in his siblings, his mother, the people he still cares for. Eleanor's first priority should be to protect herself.

"Take a break," Harrison pleads, sliding around and sitting on the couch with him. "Let's turn it off. Think about something else." Caleb nods, fingers tangling through the roots of his hair. Harrison clicks the TV off and squeezes his leg, pressing a soft kiss to his temple. Caleb has never heard so many *I love you* 's, so many *you're okay* ' s.

It takes approximately ten minutes before his Twitter is alight again. Tags from Republican politicians wishing him the worst, claiming he needs to "find God" and Democrats saying that President Chapman has "betrayed the American people and his own child". At the top of his notifications sits some from his own siblings.

***@BridgetteChapman** : My father only digs his own grave. I know both myself and my siblings have rallied behind Caleb through all of this. His happiness comes first and foremost. @ **POTUS** if your religion says you have to degrade and maim your own son, then it's a shitty religion.*

***@AndyChap: @POTUS** speak for yourself. I have been a man who followed Christian values since I first learned about the word of God. One of the very first things we learn in Sunday School is that God loves all, indiscriminately. My brother is not a shame to the lord, nor to me. Love you, brother.*

*@ **DanielChapman** : "false accusation" my ass. I'm sure Colonel Peterson has the documentation to prove otherwise.*

Just like that, the internet is hit with another storm. Both for and against him, still, but regardless of the amount of people who still wish Caleb dead, want him to repent and pay for his sins through the most egregious punishments, those same people cling to Danny's tweet. Rapidly, the attention shifts from Caleb and Harrison's sexuality to Caleb and his father's history.

Caleb sits back on the couch. He hasn't breathed in a while, he thinks. Biting his cheek, he decidedly puts his phone down, away from his person. He needs a break. Desperately, he needs a break.

"I'll drop everything," Harrison offers softly, pushing Caleb's hair back from his face. "I can be done for the day if it means we can do something else, and get away from this." Caleb nods, puffing out a breath and running a hand over his face. "Let's go get a drink. Go get some dinner. Take advantage of being out…"

“Yeah,” Caleb nods in agreement. “Yeah. Let’s- let’s not look at…” the internet? The news? His phone? Anything? “Let’s get a drink.”

“It’s legal for you here,” Harrison agrees, effortlessly avoiding the elephant in the room. He stands, pulling Caleb to his feet, dragging him toward the door. He grabs Caleb’s jacket and thrusts it into his hands as they walk the halls, Harrison notifying the necessary people about his departure.

Kate and Josephine end up tagging along. Their presence made it all the more easier to ignore the media. Their presence was just an added distraction, another voice, more comfort and excitement.

Harrison laces his fingers with Caleb’s as they walk the London streets, all four smiling like they’ve never smiled before. Caleb recalls that feeling of being in Atlanta, surrounded by seven teenagers close in age, a feeling that so closely resembles family, and home. He’s not sure whether he should fear his fondness for these three, or be elated to have them in the first place.

They go to a fairly quiet bar, sitting at a booth over a plate of fries and rounds of drinks. They can barely hear one another over pumping music and eager chatter from a few other patrons. It’s not too busy, but it’s a Monday night, so the quiet is expected. It’s nice to get out of the house and not feel fear.

Caleb rests his elbows on the table, hands folded with his chin propped on his knuckles. He nods along with Josephine’s rambles about Scotland— the goats, and the fluffy cows, and the sheep. She’s so excited to have a garden of her own to keep up on, and there’s a cute neighbor boy that comes to help sheer the sheep and takes care of the horses. Harrison reaches up, playing with the waves on the back of his head, nimble fingers twirling a small ringlet at the base of his skull.

Caleb listens to Josephine talk about home, and Harrison can only imagine Caleb in his element. Harrison can only aspire for a vacation in Georgia with him, soaking up sun rays on a drive down the coastline, or lounging by the lake with nothing but soft natural murmurs to disturb them. He wonders what Caleb looks like when his hair is heavy with saltwater, if he likes the beach at all.

After a while, when Kate and Josephine get up to go refill their drinks, Caleb notices Harrison’s sweet touch and looks over at him.

“You okay?” Caleb asks in a whisper. Harrison nods, smiling. Caleb

raises an eyebrow, amused by Harrison's pining. Caleb rests a hand on his thigh and squeezes. "I'm okay. You don't have to worry."

"I know," Harrison hums. "Just… thinking."

"And smiling. It's a little creepy," Caleb chuckles. "What could you possibly be thinking about that makes you smile like that."

"I don't know," Harrison shrugs. "Georgia… I think I would like to see it again. This time for real." Caleb softens, eyes flickering between Harrison's. "I've only been once. Maybe you can really show me Atlanta this time… or some of your favorite places. Show me where some of these scars came from."

"Yeah?" Caleb's smile quivers ever so slightly. "You wanna see it?"

"I wanna see you happy," Harrison nods. "And I wanna see what made you who you are. Because I love who you are." Caleb relaxes more with Harrison's gentle words and gentler touch.

"I'll take you," Caleb reassures softly. "You. Me. Maybe we can steal Kate and Ellie. See the city, and… and where I grew up." Harrison just keeps smiling. He loves this idea. "I could show you my grandparents' lake house in the panhandle. It is my favorite spot. I think you would like it."

"I would like anything that makes you smile," Harrison responds. Caleb bites his cheek, looking between Harrison's eyes and his mouth. "We don't have to hide. You can do it."

"Yeah?" Caleb asks, seeking permission for something that Harrison would grant at every moment of every day. Harrison rolls his eyes, carefully leaning forward and leaving a soft kiss to his mouth, lasting only a moment, but still everything Caleb needed. His eyes flutter closed, his smile gentle as a feather. Caleb kisses him a second time.

When Josephine and Kate return, the couple turn back to the girls and start plotting their Georgia trip. Kate's eyes light up at the idea of returning to Georgia, at the idea of seeing the city, and driving down to Florida, or seeing the Georgia beaches, and the places that Caleb and Eleanor ran wild as children. There's an infinite number of stories that come with Georgia, an endless realm of life that neither of the royal siblings have ever faced.

"When are you thinking?" Kate asks, propping her head on her chin. Harrison flickers his gaze to Caleb, then back to his sisters again.

“After we get Josie settled in Scotland?” Harrison offers. Josephine smiles lightly. “I wanna spend Christmas with Nan. I haven’t… I haven’t seen her since I was… what… nine? Ten? So… Christmas in Scotland, New Years in Atlanta?”

“I’ll be going to Florida for Andy’s birthday,” Caleb says gently. “You can meet me there. I’ll… I’ll run it by my Grandma first, but… I can’t imagine a world where she says no.”

“So how long until you head back to the states?” Kate asks, trying her best to hide her nerves, but failing miserably.

“I fly back Friday. I’ll be staying with my grandparents until I get something settled. Diya says she’s getting the Atlanta house set up, but… I don’t know. I’m thinking about maybe… maybe I’ll do something else. Find some place fresh to make better memories.”

“Take a page out of my book,” Josephine offers. “Starting fresh can still be an old home.” Caleb nods, smiling lightly.

They are toeing a dangerous line, getting close to a soft spot that no one wants to prod at. Their purpose for going out tonight was to avoid the idea of pain, of rejection, and fear.

New beginnings are scary.

They down one more drink with a clink . As scary as these new beginnings are, as uncertain as their futures may be, they have plenty of time to figure it all out. Because, maybe Queen Helena will die tomorrow, and Harrison will be crowned as king instantly. Or maybe they will never see a day where Harrison reigns-- nothing is promised, not even tomorrow.

Caleb is unsure where he’s going, too. College is starting to look like a lost cause. Georgetown was never home to him, anyways. He wonders how much longer before Quinn graduates, before they are no longer irresponsible college kids and officially, by every definition of the word, adults.

Nothing is certain. But tomorrow is a possibility.

After they pay their tab, they wander into London to see the Christmas lights and listen to the street musicians play their Christmas carols. The girls run ahead with loud laughs, enjoying one another’s presence for one of their last times before Josephine moves away. Harrison and Caleb trail behind, fingers laced between them, and snow fluttering

from the sky. They follow the path of the thames, Caleb curiously looking up to the sky, watching the way the twinkle lights in the trees illuminate each flake of snow.

It's almost second nature for Harrison to feel anxious when he holds Caleb's hand in public. He notices people taking photos, and he almost pulls away, an instinct to hide behind some other cover.

" *They've seen worse"* Harrison reminds himself. The people watching them now, simply holding hands, have seen Harrison kiss him. They have seen their hands in more lewd and suggestive places, evidence of something far more intimate than holding hands. This simple act, the small touch, was a blessing.

Caleb looks over at Harrison and smiles, eyeing the snowflakes that stuck to his hair artistically, as if he did it on purpose. There was one little flake that clung to his eyelash. Harrison blinks it away. Caleb always loved his Georgia sun and a heat that burns, but the snow was quickly becoming his favorite weather pattern. Caleb pulls Harrison closer. Harrison loops an arm around Caleb's waist, head tipped upwards to maintain eye contact. His second hand ghosts over Caleb's cheek, cold fingertips against his warm, pink cheek.

"I think this is worth it," Caleb whispers softly. Harrison nods, smiling.

"Me too," Harrison hums back. "I… I wish I could go back in time, save us both a lot of pain and stress… This is worth all of that stress. If I knew that-"

"I know," Caleb reassures, hands careful on Harrison's hips. "But I know why you did it." Harrison nods, eyes glazing over with a thin coating of tears. He blinks them back. "Doesn't matter anymore. It worked out."

"And it will continue to," Harrison nods. "You and me."

"Us," Caleb nods, chuckling. "We're stuck like this now. No turning back."

"That's okay," Harrison exhales, head tipping forward, Caleb pressing a kiss to his forehead. "Nothing is certain. But I… I think we are."

Chapter End Notes

Alright guys... I hate to say it, but I think we are rapidly

approaching the final chapters. I'm thinking... two more? Very real chance that the next chapter is the last one, too, though.. It really just depends on how this next one is looking... I'm gonna miss all my comment notifs from y'all-- they made my day :') especially this past weekend, between both my grandmother's and my father's health declining, and my own chronic illness and midterms taking a chokehold over my life. i really do be living that "fanfic author who publishes despite being on the brink of death" stereotype.

i havent even started on ch. 22 yet, so, uh... no idea when it will be out. maybe tomorrow. maybe next week. we'll see.

so, while i still have the chance, here's some self promo:
- follow me on twitter @ mellohayl
- i actually made a playlist for this fic, because i needed to get in the headspace. so, if you go to spotify, it's titled "stars, stripes, and aristocratic snobs" by "hayl". it's got some solid emotional bops and jams.

have a good week, friends!

Chapter 22: Wanderers, Wandering. Travelers Traversing.

Chapter Summary

> "You've stumbled every step of the way, because you're the one clearing the path."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Caleb wakes on his last morning in the UK with his face pressed into Harrison's shoulder, arm draped across his waist, trying to hide from the idea of facing real life again in the coming hours. His fingers curl around Harrison's shirt, subtly pulling Harrison's body closer to his own, taking a slow breath. Light filters through the curtains, directly into his eyes. Caleb thinks this is one of the first times in forever that he intentionally slept past 6:00 am.

He hasn't slept that well in years.

It's well past sunrise, and there's no blaring alarm startling them awake, nothing scheduled for the immediate next few hours. A flight back to the United States this afternoon, but otherwise, a free day. Harrison was still asleep, unphased by Caleb's restless twitches and occasional squirming.

Caleb presses a careful kiss on the back of Harrison's neck and lets his eyes close again. They still have time. They still have a few hours.

Not long later, Harrison starts to stir. He moves slightly before recognizing that an arm was draped across him, holding him in place. His fingers trickle along Caleb's forearm before holding his hand. Caleb's clenched fist relaxes, falling flat against Harrison's abdomen and letting Harrison's fingers weave between his own.

"Morning," Caleb whispers into Harrison's skin. Harrison puffs out a tired breath, squeezing Caleb's hand.

"Five more minutes…"

"Okay," Caleb agrees easily, just as ready to fall back asleep. His fingers skim across Harrison's belly, letting out a long breath and

relaxing fully. It's only two weeks without him, he reminds himself. He can handle two weeks. They've done worse.

Within a few minutes, Harrison wiggles again. He picks his head up slightly, looking over his shoulder and smiling at the sight of Caleb's peaceful face. He turns over, pulling Caleb's arm back around him for warmth. Through sleep clouded eyes, he admires Caleb's beauty. His long eyelashes, his cheek squished against the pillow, his lower lip slightly pouted. He's so endearing, so gentle, his brows perfectly relaxed, not a single tension crease in sight.

"Morning, love," Harrison murmurs sleepily, leaving a warm kiss on Caleb's forehead. Caleb drags Harrison closer, their bodies flush up against one another, his cold hands slipping under the hem of Harrison's shirt. His fingertips carve out the subtle muscles in Harrison's back and trace his spine, as if mapping a journey only the best explorers would dare to traverse.

"Hi baby," Caleb hums back, wanting to live in this moment forever, encased in comfort and safety.

A silent winter morning cradles them in the warmth of one another. Harrison shudders slightly, chills trailing down his spine. He tucks against Caleb's neck, searching for body heat, and maybe a little intimacy. Instantly, a sleepy smile crosses his face.

"I'm leaving this afternoon," Caleb reminds quietly.

"If we don't acknowledge it, it won't happen," Harrison whispers back, kissing Caleb's throat. Caleb chuckles at the feeling of Harrison lightly biting at his skin.

"Vampire."

"You're just biteable," Harrison jokes, voice heavy from a full night's rest. Neither remember the last time they slept a full night without interruption or worries.

Caleb turns, laying on his back, and pulling one of Harrison's legs over his hips. Harrison straddles his torso, leaning down and peppering more kisses across every exposed portion of skin. Caleb just looked so soft and cozy in his hoodie, one hand gripping Harrison's thigh, the other still dragging along his spine.

"I know you're sore," Harrison mumbles against his cheek, kissing the corner of his mouth. "Tell me if I'm hurting you."

“I’m okay,” he insists, eyes fluttering closed and head tipping as Harrison kisses that little crook at the curve to Caleb’s jaw, directly below his ear. He takes a sharp breath, his grip on Harrison’s leg tightening. Harrison cracks a smile at the sound of a shaky exhale ghosting past his ear.

“You sure about that?” Harrison whispers. Caleb nods frantically. “You sound a little off…”

“I swear to god-” Caleb murmurs back, trembling as he pulls Harrison back toward his neck. Harrison snickers against his skin, leaving another kiss to his sensitive jaw. He pulls ever so slightly on the collar of Caleb’s hoodie, leaving a little piece of himself, out of sight, to tie him over until December 28th. A small reddish-purple spot, just over his collarbone.

Harrison laughs at Caleb’s eager hands, both pushing up the hem of Harrison’s shirt and tugging on the waistband to Harrison’s joggers. He slides off his boyfriend (that word still felt so foreign), Caleb pushing his body into the bed. Caleb plants himself between Harrison’s legs, meeting his mouth with feverish need. Harrison takes a fistful of Caleb’s hoodie and welcomes the opened mouth kisses with gratitude.

They don’t worry that someone will walk in. They don’t worry being seen in places they shouldn’t be together. The world, and especially the palace, knows to knock before they enter, and better yet-- leave them be.

Harrison is the first one to brave the cold, almost an hour and a half later. Caleb settles deeper against the pillows, his hood over his head, chewing on one of the strings. Blankets are pulled to his waist to warm his chilled lower half-- he was already craving Harrison’s touch again, but if he was honest, he really enjoyed seeing Harrison get dressed, too. One arm propped behind his head, his eyes trace the goosebump coated skin, the delicateness to his body, the bone structure in his back, and, in all honesty, he was also eyeing the curvature to his ass. Harrison catches Caleb watching through the reflection of his mirror and rolls his eyes, turning and throwing a pair of clean briefs at Caleb’s head.

“Hey!” Caleb groans.

“My dear, I would love for today to be spent entirely without clothes, but you have a flight in three hours,” Harrison recalls, carefully

pulling on briefs of his own.

He looks over at Caleb and nearly melts. Handsome as ever, relaxed in Harrison's bed. His waves poked out from his hood, his sweatshirt a little loose on him, one hand running across his chest and the other tucked behind his head. God, he's so beautiful. He crawls across the bed, cupping Caleb's jaw gently, his lips hovering merely an inch away.

"I will spend the entirety of the Georgia trip undressed if you so choose," Harrison whispers, thumb tracing his jaw. Caleb lets his chewed hoodie string fall from his lips, a goofy smile on his face. "That sound good to you?"

"It sounds like a dream," Caleb teases, happily accepting a warm kiss. Harrison takes a full breath, hand dragging along Caleb's chest. Perhaps, it's not just Caleb with self control issues. Caleb snickers as Harrison's fingertips graze his hip-bone. "You're the one saying I needed to get dressed."

"Three hours- I can get a couple more before then," Harrison says decisively, making Caleb laugh. "One more."

"I won't tell you no," Caleb smirks, tipping his head up with a cocky smile as Harrison kisses his neck and slides under the sheet that covers his body.

They barely have time for lunch before he leaves.

Harrison and Caleb eat in Harrison's kitchen, Harrison leaning against the counter and talking about the plans with Josephine. Caleb would do anything to not think about his own family right now, and Harrison's drama was the perfect distraction.

"You're gonna see the stars for the first time," Caleb realizes, smiling. Harrison rolls his eyes.

"I've seen them. Just, y'know… not by a lot-"

"These shitty stars in the city are nothing compared to a dark town," Caleb insists. "You're- you're gonna get to see it finally. You'll love it. It's magical. Straight out of a fairytale. Especially if you have a good moon up there too—"

Harrison smiles as Caleb rambles about the stars, something that Caleb himself hasn't seen in far too long. Caleb talks about them

though like he lives among them, like the stars were his brothers and sisters, and the galaxy was his soul. He was everything in this expansive universe, and then some. At least, that's how Harrison saw him.

It's a sad goodbye.

Caleb was putting off leaving as long as possible. He checked that he had everything six times. He asked Harrison if he needed anything another four times. He just… he didn't want to go. He didn't want to face the world again. He's spent the past several days looking anywhere but his phone. He hasn't been in contact with anybody about anything. Only his grandmother, but even that was prior to the press conference.

He held onto Harrison, squeezed tight, face hidden in his shoulder. Harrison plays with the tufts of his hair, kissing his head, and tries not to fear the moment Caleb inevitably lets go.

"You are all you," Harrison whispers into his hair. "No one can change you." Caleb nods, sniffling. "I love you."

"I love you," Caleb whispers back, squeezing one last time. Harrison squeezes back. "Two weeks."

"You can handle two weeks," Harrison promises as Caleb pulls away. He holds Caleb's cheek, attempting a smile. "And if you can't… find somewhere safe, and lay low until I can get there."

"I'll be okay," Caleb nods. Harrison smiles, pecking his lips and taking a careful step away. "Two weeks."

"Two weeks," Harrison grins. "And I'll call you, and send you your texts."

"You better."

The flight home is agonizing. Mainly because he wasn't going home. Or… perhaps, to the White House. If anything, this damned lake house was closer to home than any other dumb $900K+ house he lived in.

He spent the flight napping, listening to music, and reading anything he could to get his mind off of what will come when he sees his grandparents. To be honest, most of his family will be in Jackson County— they would be celebrating Andy's birthday there this year,

so there's a good chance he walks in to see his entire family and then some.

He lands in Atlanta, and gets an Uber to the Atlanta house. It's not until he is giving the Uber driver an address that he realized… he forgot it. It's been over three years now since they set off from the Atlanta house for DC. He hasn't needed the address since. He goes through his notes app and finds the address to the house he grew up in, and sits back silently, shocked and appalled by his own memory. His life was in that neighborhood, but he didn't remember the damned address.

His car is still parked in the driveway when he arrives. He knew it would be, but for some reason, it was still surprising. A stupid Suburu Outback sits in his driveway, mostly untouched. He knows his cousins have been occupying the house while the Chapmans were in DC, taking care of the cars, watering the plants, making sure the floors don't rot on them…

It will be weird to sit in his car again. Sure, it was his. Registered in his name, back on his sixteenth birthday, and about ten thousand miles all done by him, and he pays the taxes on it every year. But it's been three years since he drove, well… anything. He's had a driver. He's had it all.

He sets his stuff by the car and goes toward the house to grab his key. He's unsure what to expect from his old house. He grabs the spare key from the planter, carefully slipping into his old abode. Somehow, it still smells like home, like art supplies and burritos and pool chlorine. He doesn't go too deep into the house— it hardly feels like his own anymore. More like an artifact, like it belongs to someone else. He's tempted to look at his old bedroom, but decides against it. He just takes the key to his car, sat on the hook as always, and goes.

"Caleb?" Someone calls out as he approaches his car. He glances up, biting his cheek at the sight of both Finch and Malcolm walking together down the street. He thinks it was Finch who called out. "Is that you?"

"Sure is," he gives an awkward smile, stuffing his hands in his hoodie pockets and slowly approaching the end of his driveway to meet them there. He doesn't feel like he's in good enough attire to be recognized. His hair is messy from a long flight. He's in joggers and a sweatshirt despite it being forty degrees warmer here than it was in London. He looks like he could sleep for a year.

“I was wondering who the hell just got dropped off at your old place. You moving back to Atlanta?” Finch asks. It felt too casual from a guy who blocked him on, well, everything.

“Not sure yet,” Caleb says simply. “Just got back to the States. I’m staying down in the panhandle with my grandparents for a couple weeks.” There’s a break of silence. Caleb could tell they wanted to ask. Ask about all of it— the gay stuff, the Harrison stuff, the Dad stuff, everything. But no one knew what to say. Caleb shifts on his feet and looks away for a moment before glancing back at them. “I-I’m not sure what I did to you guys. I’ll… I’ll be honest. I don’t know what I did to upset everyone. But I am sorry. And… And I hope you guys are getting that picturesque future. Lord knows you deserve it.”

“Caleb…” Malcolm frowns. “I didn’t mean for-“

“You did. But that’s okay,” Caleb shrugs, folding his arms around himself. “You’re allowed to not like me. Lord knows you’re not the only one right about now. I just wanted to apologize. The last thing I ever wanted was to hurt you guys. I wouldn’t have made it this far without you.” Caleb’s phone vibrates. He glances at it.

Just Harrison: i miss you

“How are you holding up?” Finch asks finally. Caleb looks back up at them, biting his cheek. “We’ve seen the news, dude. Don’t try it.”

“Honest?” Caleb asks. They nod. “I’m scared shitless. It’s been a shitstorm, and I haven’t really looked at my phone since my dad told the world I was dead to him. But I’ll… I’ll figure it out. Sure as hell isn’t the first time I lost people close to me.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Malcolm insists. “We just thought-“

“I don’t- I don’t need to know,” Caleb interrupts. “I’d… I’d rather just… move on at this point. You guys live your lives. I’ll live mine.”

“We were worried that-“

“I was like my dad?” Caleb assumes, tired of them trying to explain themselves. They’re quiet. “Next time, I suggest asking first. Turns out, I’m nothing like my father, and Annika is taking his side. Miracle how that happens.”

“I’m sorry,” Malcolm frowns. “I… I didn’t know Annika… I didn’t know.”

“Don’t be,” Caleb sighs. “Happens.” His phone is buzzing again. Harrison is trying to call him. He hesitates, weighing his options. He decides against answering, pocketting his phone again.

“Things working out with Harrison?” Finch asks finally. Caleb raises an eyebrow. A small, barely-there smile joins his expressions.

“We’re doing what we can,” Caleb nods. “He’s coming here after Christmas. The Halloween party was a bit of a travesty, so hopefully this time I can actually show him around the south.”

“Make sure you stop by Ma’s,” Finch insists. “Some of the group was there last week. She doesn’t shut up about missing you, especially now that you’re all… big named.”

“We’re starting out in Florida with my grandparents, but when we venture up I’ll make sure to stop by,” Caleb reassures. “I haven’t seen any of it in… what… three years?”

“Never vacationed back here?” Malcolm asks.

“You think I would’ve come by and not told you guys?” Caleb cracks a sad smile. “No. Dad didn’t let us come down.”

“Has he always been so…?” Finch tails of.

“Controlling?” He suggests with a scoff. “Asshole-ish? Yeah.” His childhood friends shift awkwardly. “That’s why I hid as long as I did. Had to play the straight and narrow, y’know?”

“Emphasis on the straight,” Finch mentions, making Caleb smile. “Listen… I… I owe you a thousand apologies. All of us do… so, when you and Harrison come back to Atlanta, pop into Ma’s. I’ve been working more often than not, so I’ll meet you there.”

“Yeah?” His heart leapt to his throat. “You sure you want to?”

“Give me your updated phone number,” Finch requests, pulling out his cell. “I’ll text you my schedule. No pressure, but Ma would love to see you, and we need a chance to catch up.”

Caleb gives a small smile, rocking on his heels as he gives Finch and Malcolm his updated phone number. Part of him fears sabotage, fears that this was some manipulative tactic for them to get a selling story . But god he misses his friends. He misses his people, his life.

When they part ways, Caleb is stricken with hope.

It's a four and a half hour drive. At first, Caleb was nervous to sit behind the wheel again. It's been so long since he drove, he wonders if he forgot how to. He was nervous, and rough around the edges, but once he was on the highway, it became natural to him again. Go 70MPH, sometimes a little faster, sometimes slower. Go through the tolls slowly. Sit in traffic. Listen to music. Stop for a drink on the way. His heart races as Georgia slips into the rear view mirror and he gets infinitely closer to a place he hasn't been in years, to people he hasn't seen since last Christmas. He spoke to Grandma briefly about staying with her, and while she was happy to have him back, he knows there is plenty that has gone unsaid, plenty they need to discuss.

The dirt road toward the little cottage on the lake is an old trail he knows too well. The bushes are overgrown, and the old tire swing in the tree has been worn down by the elements. The rope looks ready to snap, frayed at the edges. The house could do with a nice coat of paint, too, having been chipped and peeled away by bad storms.

Grandma stands on the front porch, leaning against the railing, and watches Caleb's car steadily pull up the dirt driveway and find it's parking spot closest to the trees. He closes the door behind him, offering his grandmother a soft smile from afar.

"Get your tush over here, lovey," Grandma scolds before he can go into his car for any of his stuff. He blushes, abandoning his car and jogging up the pathway to the front porch. She pulls her grandson into a crushing hug, her arms squeezing him tight. She smells like citrus and rose-scented soaps. Her hair has gotten greyer, and significantly longer, the front pieces clipped out of her face. "Oh goodness, I missed you, dear…"

"I missed you too," he mumbles. She pulls back, cupping his cheek. Her eyes shine with excitement and joy, harboring so much pride in the grandson standing before her. Her beaming smile, her happy squinted eyes, are quickly replaced by a glazed-over expression, her upturned grin quivering.

"What did your Daddy make of you, baby?" she whispers sadly. God, her voice was earth-shattering. Caleb wanted to apologize, to plead for her forgiveness, to beg for normalcy, but instead, he's left silent, wordless, fearful. She held his chin and studied his lip, still pink with a mark but otherwise healed. "That son of a bitch better not have laid a hand on my boy."

“I’m okay,” he reassures gently.

“Don’t you start. That miss Diya already rang me up, let me know about those damned hands of yours,” she tsks, turning her head toward the house and looking through the screen door. “Bobby!”

“Is he here, Ellie?” Grandpa calls back, standing from the couch with a small groan and scurrying toward the door. Grandpa’s face, wrinkled and aged, looking a little less lively than the last they saw one another, brightens in an instant. A broad, toothy grin takes over his face. Grandpa swung the door open and cheers, arms swung out, eager for a hug of his own. “That’s my boy! Hi bubbas!”

Caleb laughs through his hurt. He hates seeing his grandpa age so dramatically between each visit. He’s turning eighty four in the next few weeks. He’s survived lung cancer twice. He had a bout with pneumonia a few months back that landed him in the ICU. But here he is, barely any hair left on his head, littered with age spots, his vision going and his hearing aids barely any help, but just as spry. He dreads the day he loses his grandparents on Mom’s side-- they’ve been more of his parents than his own.

“I’m gonna go grab some of those bags from that car o’ yours, you go sit down and eat some dinner. Lord knows the last time you had a good family meal,” Grandma insists.

“No- no, Gram, I can get it-” Caleb starts to pull away from his grandpa to start toward his car. She waves her hand at him.

“Go. I have plenty of chores for you to do for me later. I can handle a few rollers,” she orders. “You’re helpin’ me change some light bulbs and with cleanin’ the gutters tomorrow.”

Caleb gives in, letting his Grandpa drag him by the wrist inside. The cats eagerly weave through his legs and hop on the counters in an effort to greet him. Caleb smiles as his personal favorite of the four-- Sasha, a traditional tabby with a heart of gold-- practically lunges at him for attention. She mewls and cries to be pet and held. He loves the other three too, of course-- Salem, and Pluto, and Earl were all very sweet. But Sasha was his. Bridgette and Andy picked out Salem, and Pluto was Danny’s, and Caleb and Eleanor adopted Earl with their grandpa a few years back. But Sasha was his baby-- a kitten they found under the dock, freezing to death, malnourished, and barely a chance at survival. He lived at Grandma and Grandpa’s house for almost three months, an entire summer, getting her to her full health.

“I think she missed you, Bubbas,” Grandpa notes, smiling as Caleb swiftly lifted her into his embrace. She pushes her face against Caleb’s jaw and mewls again.

“Hi sweetie,” Caleb coos, smiling ear to ear. She paws at his face and her teeth scrape his chin. “Hi…”

“Your Grammy made you some of that pasta you always loved when you were a tike,” Grandpa says, pointing to the pot on the stove. “And I made a couple loaves of fresh bread. Your brother’s been asking me for the recipe for months now, figured I’d make you each some for tomorrow.”

“When will Andy be getting here?” Caleb asks, hiding his nerves behind a smile and his loving attention trained on the cat who purred up a storm in his arms.

“All of ‘em are comin’ tomorrow morning,” Grandpa admits. “All but your Daddy. He and his Dad will be comin’ down though for Christmas.” Caleb nods once. “He won’t put his hands on you, Bubbas. He’d be damned if he thinks he can get away with that in my house.”

“I’m okay,” Caleb reassures softly. “I just have to stay out of his way, and hopefully not start any trouble… I’ll just… keep my mouth shut and wait for him to leave.”

“No no, we don’t play that way over here,” Grandpa chastises. “You talk about what you want. You talk about what makes you happy. That son of a bitch thinks he can get away with being a prick, he’s got another thing comin’.”

“You’ve got a foul mouth on you in your old age,” Caleb teases in an effort to move on from that topic.

“Ain’t that the truth,” Grandma agrees, setting his bags down by the stairs. “Baby, you’ll be in the bedroom upstairs. I think you’ve outgrown those little bunk beds down here.”

“He’s growin’ like a weed, I tell you,” Grandpa agrees, eyeing him down.

“I don’t mind being in the big room if you prefer-” Caleb reassures.

“No, no, not a chance,” Grandma scoffs. “When that boy comes over? What, you thinkin’ you’ll be fighting over who gets top bunk like when you were a kid?” Caleb blushes. “You’re grown. Just keep it

clean, and do your own laundry."

"Thank you," Caleb says in barely a whisper. She nods. Caleb carefully sets Sasha down by her food bowl and washes up his hands before dinner. Grandma and Grandpa make three plates and set them at the table. It's nearly 10PM-- he can't believe they didn't eat dinner yet. "You didn't have to wait for me…"

"I haven't seen you in a year, lovey," Grandma recalls, sitting at the table with him. The three sit together, smiling. Caleb feels like a kid again. "And in that year, you have fallen in love and gotten into a load of trouble. Shame on me for wanting to hear about it all."

"I'm alright," Caleb promises, stabbing through a forkful of penne pasta and some zucchini.

"Tell me about the boy," Grandma props her chin on her palm, grinning. "Pretend I know nothing about him. Tell me all about it."

"Gram,"

" *Caleb* ," she mocks. "Your Grandpa and I have been anxiously awaiting some details for the past two weeks. Indulge us."

"Okay, okay," Caleb blushes. "It's- I don't know. It's going well."

"Oh come *on* . Give me more than that," she pleads. "What's he like? When you think of a prince, all I can imagine is someone who's been stuck up and snooty their entire life. Tell me what this boy is like. Why are you interested? What makes him who he is?"

"I-I don't know," Caleb shrugs. He ponders the question in his mind for a long moment before settling on the small details that announce themselves in every interaction, the little things that Caleb can't help but think about every time they're together. "He's… untouched by life. Out of his entire body, he has only one scar, and it's from falling in the castle when he was a child." They smile, listening to the little details. "And when he sees any of my scars or dents, his first thought is the story . He's- He's a fountain of knowledge, a warehouse of thoughts, but he hasn't seen the world at all. He is the least experienced well-traveled man I have ever seen."

"You say this like these are good things," Grandpa mentions, eyebrows furrowed.

"I-I don't see them as *flaws* ," Caleb says simply. "It's… it's

opportunity. He's a blank canvas, and I get to see his painting develop. It's like watching the creation of the universe." Caleb felt his heart skip a beat at the idea-- the creation of someone so ethereal. Something so other-worldly. "He's never seen the stars before."

"Never?" Grandpa frowns.

"Never," Caleb confirms. "He's going to a desolate part of Scotland in a few days. And I can just imagine what he will think when he finally sees them."

"There's no better view of them than here," Grandma reminds. "I'm excited to meet him."

"Yeah?" Caleb's face softens, biting his cheek. He wants to cry.

"Of course," she hums. "If he gets you smiling like this, he sure as hell must be good."

That night, it's weird to not go into the room stocked with two bunk beds and a million children's toys on the first floor. Instead, he carries his stuff upstairs to the guest room, also known as Mom's old bedroom when she lived here. It's simple, but cute. One wall was paneled, the rest a light, almost grey-blue. The bed, a white comforter covering it with a blue quilt along the end of the bed. It's a small space, with only enough room for a bed, the dresser, a mirror, and the tiny closet. It was cozy. It was safe.

He can't sleep that night. He's overwhelmed thinking about what will happen tomorrow-- what his siblings will say, if Mom will so much as look at him, and how he will handle being stuck here for two weeks, leading up to a holiday he just knows will end badly.

At one point, he calls Harrison. An old habit-- they barely speak. Only a few brief passing conversations before Caleb sinks into a peaceful enough headspace to sleep. He realizes in the morning, long after his phone battery died and forced the call to end, that it must have been a horrific hour to call him last night. If anything, it may have been approaching dawn for Harrison when Caleb called him. Once his phone was charged enough to turn on again, he sends his boyfriend an apology text, heart-reacting to the 6am text that awaits him. Today's morning text was: *fun fact: the human heart is about the size of the average person's fist. However, mine is approximately 6'3 and somehow has a heart of it's own, too.* Caleb texts back: *you should get that looked at.*

He helps Grandpa with breakfast. Grandpa makes all three of them omelettes while Caleb gets them all toast and some fruit salad. Grandma comes in from the chicken coup with a bowl of eggs and washes up for breakfast, squeezing Caleb's arm gently.

"Baby, I'm gonna ask you for some help on the gutters today," she warns. "Don't wear any white. You might get dirty."

"Yes ma'am," Caleb cracks a smile. "When's everyone getting here?"

"They landed a couple hours back in Jacksonville. I'd say give 'em an hour or so," Grandma hums. "Did you sleep alright last night?" Caleb nods, choosing to refrain from indulging them on his history of insomniac nights only tempered by the companionship of some stupid little British boy.

He's not all too hungry-- he only eats about half of breakfast. He feeds the cats before helping Grandma with the gutters as she requested. He wonders the last time someone did them, seeing how loaded with leaves and other weird shit it was. Grandma is working on painting the railings to the porch as he clambers the ladder and starts polishing the old metal. The smell of a mixture of paint and nature reminds him of being little, of cleaning up the dock and helping Grandpa on the boat in the late fall, early winter season. It never gets cold enough to pull the boat out of the water, but they had to be careful with the wind storms that would pass through. Caleb has a not-so-fond memory of the boat getting free and having to walk half a mile through the woods to ask the neighbor to borrow one of their jetskis to go get it.

He's just about done when he hears the crunching of gravel and dirt, Mom's minivan pulling up the driveway, followed closely by Andy's BMW. Caleb felt his heart rate skyrocket, and his stomach plummet. He takes a breath, getting off the ladder and washing his hands off with the hose around the side of the house. Maybe, if he doesn't look at them, if he hides, they won't notice him.

"Where is he?" Is the first thing he heard Eleanor say. He wipes his hands on his pants, turning off the water.

"Around the side," Grandma tells her. He hears Eleanor's running footsteps before he sees her. She darts around the side of the house.

"Oh my God-" Eleanor gasps, sprinting toward him. She lunges into a hug, making him stumble back a couple steps. He caught himself, arms wound tight around his little sister. Her feet dangle slightly above the ground. She cries hysterically into his shoulder, gripping his

shirt by the fistful. “I missed you, you asshole. You never texted me back- You- you asshole .”

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs into her hair, carefully setting her back on her feet. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Well you did,” she pulls away, smacking at his chest. “Not to mention, Mom has been a wreck. No one can talk to Dad anymore. You are all we got, and you wouldn’t fucking text back.”

“Watch your mouth,” Caleb finally slaps her arm back in response to her annoying hitting and pounding against his chest. She scowls, wiping her tears and folding her arms over her chest stubbornly. “Gram will smack the shit out of you if she hears you talkin’ like that. You’re twelve.”

“You’re one to talk,” she sneers, jaw trembling. She wipes her tears again, sniffling. He raises an eyebrow, waiting for her to calm down again. “How is his family? How is he?”

“Better than us in some ways. Worse in others,” Caleb admits. She nods. “He’s got Kate and Josie. He’ll be okay. Just like I got you. Can’t be too bad with your annoying butt around.”

“Idiot,” she frowns, but moves in to hug him again, this time not hitting him as she does. He lets her, gently rubbing her shaking shoulders. “Are you hurt?”

“Everything is healing,” Caleb whispers back. She sniffles. “Couple scars. Few sore spots. Otherwise, fine.”

“Danny said you needed stitches,” she pulls away again, her eyelashes clumping together from tears, her face pink. He nods.

“Total of eight,” he admits. She grimaces, eyes scanning him, as if looking for the source. He turns over his palms to let her look. She winces at the still bright red scars. “Technically, I did it to myself. It’s not like he stabbed me. Just… got pushed around a little too much and chose the wrong place to fall. Can’t be too pissed about it.”

“Shut up,” she says back. “That doesn’t make it any better.”

“C’mon, it makes it a little better, knowing it came from my own clumsiness,” Caleb offers. “It’s like when you ate shit on the dock a few years back and got that stupid scar on your face.”

“You tripped me !” She exclaims, laughing, and hitting his arm again. “I didn’t just fall, doofus!”

He follows her back around and into the house, the two debating whether the scar on her forehead was from her falling or Caleb “tripping her”. In his opinion, it’s not his fault that she didn’t see him laid on the dock. She should have been watching where she was running if she didn’t want to fall. Also, her foot to his ribs was pretty freaking painful, too.

He finds his older sister and little brother hanging out in the bunk bed guest room. He peers into the bedroom, seeing three of the four beds were claimed. Bridgette was taking the top bunk on the left side of the room, as always. Eleanor scored the bottom bunk below her because, quote, “Bri doesn’t fart in her sleep”. Danny was on the top bunk on the right side, plugging in his phone. The fourth bed sits empty.

“No Andy?” Caleb asks gently of his little brother. Danny’s attention shot up. He gives Caleb a sad smile.

“He’s outside with Gramps and Ma showing Frankie the boat. He’s decided he’s too good for us and will stay in a hotel instead,” Danny jokes. Caleb hesitates, flickering his attention to Bridgette, then Danny again.

“Frankie?” Caleb raises an eyebrow.

“...Oh,” Danny frowns.

“You’ll like her. She’s sweet. She reminds me a lot of-” Bridgette stops herself before she says the name she was thinking. Caleb can fill the void pretty well, though. “Doesn’t matter. She’s a sweetheart. Ellie and her are already pretty close, right?” Eleanor nods quickly, smiling.

“Didn’t know Andy was dating. Figured he was committed to that whole Senate-first thing,” Caleb says with a small smile. They’re quiet. “Alright. Got it. I’m making things awkward.”

“Caleb-” Bridgette immediately starts to get up. “Hey, I’m sorry. I’m not trying to-”

“Do me a favor, let’s not make the next two weeks about this, shall we?” Caleb pleads with his sister, whirling back around. “Trust me, I am just as thrilled as the rest of you are about this whole situation. I don’t need it to be echoed forever.”

“Buddy we support you,” she insists. “I’m-I’m not trying to make it awkward. I just… I don’t know what to… say. Or do. Or…. or anything to make this better-”

“Then don’t,” Caleb says simply.

He realizes just how long it’s been since he had a regular conversation with his older sister. In all honesty, he barely spoke to Bridgette or Andrew, for that matter. He always spent his days with Eleanor or Danny-- mostly because Bridgette and Andrew moved out early. He’s not sure how to talk to his older siblings, or what to say to them. He still instinctively wants to make them proud, wants to be their friend, but something tells him they’ve passed that point, and now… they just have to be okay with being around each other.

“You don’t have to say anything, or do anything,” Caleb repeats. “The best way to make this better is to carry on like nothing changed. Because nothing changed. I am the same person I was eighteen years ago when you stuffed a LEGO up my nose, and the same person I’ll be in fifty years when we’re all bickering in a nursing home. Got it?” There’s a beat of silence. Caleb takes a breath and decides to step away. “I’m gonna go say hi to Andy. I’m not making his birthday about this.”

“Okay,” Bridgette nods.

He excuses himself, headed toward the dock. Mom is there with Andy, Grandpa, and a girl he’s seen in a few photos over the years. Andy looks over and breaks out in a grin.

“Hey stupid,” Andy held an arm out. Caleb lets his oldest sibling hug him tight around the shoulders.

“Happy birthday, man,” Caleb pats him on the back before pulling away and stuffing his hands in his pockets. He looks at the girl that was half hidden behind his brother. “Hey. I’m Andy’s brother.”

“You guys never met?” Andy furrows his eyebrows. “Gosh- I’m sorry. Frankie, my little brother. Caleb, my fiancé, Frankie,”

Fiance .

“Oh,” Caleb cracks a smile instantly, hiding his sudden confusion. “I have the worst memory. I’ve heard about you.” I have never heard your name before, who the fuck is this? “Nice to finally meet you.”

“I thought so,” Andy chuckles. “We’re never all in the same place. Mom actually only met her, like, two months ago.”

“Funny how that works,” Caleb contributes. Frankie is smiling with a nod. “Feel like you grew up on us and suddenly you’re too mature to hang out with your little siblings.”

“Yeah, okay Mister London,” Andy shot back, smiling. Caleb flushes pink. “Can’t say much about being too good for family .” Andy is smiling, laughing even. It’s almost comfortable. Almost a tease that Caleb felt okay having jabbed at him. But he keeps thinking about whoever the hell this Frankie girl is. Where did she come from? How long has his brother been dating? How long has he been engaged? Is Bridgette dating? “How was the trip?”

“After everything was said and done? Good,” Caleb says casually. “The four of us just hung out. Not much more I could’ve asked for.”

“Good. I like seeing you settle into a group of friends like that,” Andy cracks a smile. “Quinn’s been up my ass for the past week asking about you. I suggest calling him when you have a chance.”

“On it,” Caleb nods. Grandma calls him from the front yard. “Alright. Nice meeting you, Frankie— I’m gonna to check in with her.”

“We’ll catch up tonight, man. You, me and Bri need to go on one of our walks again,” Andy reassures. Caleb agrees before he jogs back toward Grandma and helps her finish up on some work in the front yard-- mostly just washing any paint that splattered to the wrong place.

The rest of the day is pleasant. There is nothing forced about being together, nothing exhausting, and everyone skillfully avoids talking about Dad, and mostly avoids asking about Harrison, too. It’s almost normal.

They make dinner together. Caleb doesn’t remember the last time he laughed so much with his siblings. He doesn’t really remember the last time they all had the chance to freely spend time together at all. Sure, they were together on holidays and birthdays, but there’s always been this looming presence. Not necessarily Dad, and hell, not even necessarily the press. Just this idea that their lives weren’t their own, that they were puppets on show for the world to watch. For once, they get a break. For the first time in forever, they see the real versions of themselves.

Caleb didn't realize how loud Bridgette was. When she's really invested in a story, her voice just slowly ticks up in volume, until she is shaking and yelling at them, barking out laughter that is nothing short of contagious. And Andrew is so… gentle. He's sat close to Frankie, and leans over to whisper in her ear, or play with her hair. He loves her so gently. And Danny is hysterical . He and Eleanor are a tag team of hilarity-- they manage to make everyone's faces and stomachs hurt from a full night of laughter, and they're not even drinking.

After dinner, Andrew steals Caleb and Bridgette for a late-night walk around the property. Caleb stands and excuses himself from the table, stuffing his hands in his pockets and follows his oldest siblings out.

It's a weird trio, the three of them. They are the three adults of the Chapman children. They are the eldest, the ones more frequently in the news. They are neither close nor distant. They don't typically exist together. Not often enough, at least.

He strolls beside Bridgette, listening to Andy and Bridgette talk wedding plans. Andy knows just about nothing. Just that Frankie wanted a winter wedding in her home state of Vermont.

"How long have you been together?" Caleb asks his brother quietly. Andy thinks for a moment.

"About two years?" He guesses. Caleb nods slowly. "We got engaged about… two weeks ago? Moved in together back in May."

"Two weeks ago?" Caleb raises an eyebrow, sending him a smirk. "You really slipped through the cracks with that one, huh?"

"If it's any consolation, it wasn't on purpose," Andy insists. "I wasn't trying to hide behind your problems. I just… I proposed the night before the leak. And I was supposed to come over for dinner with her, announce it to everyone, but it didn't really work out for unforeseen circumstances." Caleb bites his cheek. "You didn't know about her at all?"

"I think I saw her in an Instagram post a year ago?" Caleb says back, not making eye contact as he kicks a rock ahead of them. "Guess that proves how much I've been paying attention."

"We're not one to talk," Bridgette scoffs. "You managed to have a secret relationship with the Prince of England and none of us noticed." Caleb feels his face heat up, his throat tightening. "How long have you

and Harrison been…"

"The… The rose garden photos were actually the first," Caleb admits in a whisper. "My birthday. It's only been a few months, but…"

"But?" Bridgette hums back, smiling. Caleb gets redder. They come upon the dock, the two of his siblings sinking down onto the edge. He sits with them, arms rested on his knees. "You love him?"

"You think I would have gone through all this if I didn't?" Caleb looks out to the quiet water, the moon reflected on the lake, the ripples from frogs and fish restless, even at this time of year. "Yeah. I…I do. It's a weird feeling. Like... it's trapped right at the top of your sternum, under your throat? Like you could just… *pop* ?" They both smile. "I probably sound crazy. I don't know. It's early, but I… I know I love him."

"It's not crazy," Andy reassures. "When I told Grandpa I was proposing, he told me he's loved Gram since the second week of them dating. It's been… 60 years?" Caleb smiles down at his hands, picking at his nails anxiously. "I saw this picture the other day. One of you and… and all three of the royals. And I just can't get over how happy you looked." Caleb looks up at his brother, gaze softening. Bridgette was already pulling out her phone to find the photo he was talking about. "You guys were just… out and about. And you were holding his hand and smiling like you've never smiled before. Buddy, I have watched you wallow in misery for years, and watched you get dragged through hell in these past two weeks. That smile though? I understand it. And I'm so happy to see it."

"Even if it's not… y'know-" his voice caught.

"The "gay" thing doesn't phase me," Andy says back, reaching out and resting a hand on his arm. Caleb looks up at his big brother. He wonders if Eleanor or Danny have ever felt this kind of way about him. Scared of his disappointment, but so happy to be related to him, no matter how things turn out. It's not an easy relationship, but he wouldn't trade Andy for anything. "It was a surprise, sure. But I'm not… disappointed. Or upset. If anything, I'm proud. You are in a really scary position right now, and you're handling it with grace."

"It feels like I've stumbled on every step-"

"It's uncharted territory," Bridgette intervenes. "Caleb… it's hard. I won't discredit that. It's hard, and scary, and I can only imagine how you feel right now. But I want you to see this from a new

perspective…" Bridgette moves so she's crouching in front of him, squeezing his hand. "There's an entire world out there, of people who don't know what they're going to do. An entire world of people who have shitty dads, and uncertain futures, and unsafe households. And maybe you have it easier, but you are setting an example that it's possible to be true to yourself, even when you're scared for your life." Caleb bites the inside of his quivering lip, nodding. "You have major companies donating to charities in your name. You have people in positions of power relooking the way LGBTQ+ youth are treated. And you're setting an example for millions of people that… they can be happy, with or without the support of their parents. You've stumbled on every step because you're the one clearing the path. The first person to scale Mt. Everest and survive didn't have an easy time, but fuck… he still did it, and he set a precedent for everyone else that *difficult* doesn't mean *impossible* ."

Caleb sniffles, shaking his head. He pulls his hands away, running one through his hair. He looks back at his older siblings with a sad smile.

"Did your dorky ass just compare me to Sir Edmund Hillary?" Caleb asks, earning laughter from his siblings.

"Did your dorky ass just know the first person to survive Mt. Everest from memory?" Bridgette shot back, smacking his knee playfully.

"It's Sir Edmund Hillary!" Caleb exclaims. "He's a legend-"

"Andy, will you please Google the first person to scale-"

"Sir Edmund Hillary of New Zealand, born 1919, died 2008," Andrew confirms with a frown. "How did you even know that?"

"Listen-- I freaking love mountains and-"

"You are such a nerd!" Bridgette accuses. "Oh my God you are so lame. What, do you just spend your spare time reading Wikipedia articles about Mt. Everest?"

"So what if I do?" Caleb shot back, grinning ear to ear.

"You're kidding. Buddy that is so boring-" Andrew says.

"You're literally getting married in Vermont, and I'm the boring one?"

Harrison was unsure what to expect from Scotland.

He's only been to Edinburgh before. He went to Edinburgh a lot as a child with his parents, and typically, that was the only time he saw his grandparents on Mum's side. Nana and Poppa would come to the Palace of Holyrood and meet them, spoil their three grandchildren with gifts and love. This is typically where they stole away Josephine and Mum, too, to go back to the farm, giving Josephine a life that Harrison and Kate would never experience.

He watches Scotland pass him by out the window, head propped up against the glass and his knees crunched up against the passenger seat. He's been listening to a playlist that Quinn directed him to listen to back in October-- a collection of songs, a mixture of rap, modern pop, and older songs that Harrison already knew. Josephine and Kate have grown tired of their conversation and fell quiet approximately three hours ago. Now, they sit in comfortable silence, Kate asleep with Harrison's jacket as a blanket, and Josephine noting all the pretty landscapes.

Harrison is trying not to dwell on the drive home in approximately two weeks, without Josephine in the front seat. He doesn't want to imagine what Kensington will be like without her flustered mothering, her annoying chides and quips about how they should act and present, both in the home and outside of it. He's going to miss Sunday game nights with Mum and his sisters, and as stiff as they were, he loved his stupid family dinners, even if the table is more empty chairs than not.

Who will he go to when he needs advice? Where will he turn when he's helpless in the identification of his own emotions, or in need of someone to complain to about his American boyfriend's idiocy? Harrison loved his little sister-- Kate was quite possibly his best friend, as depressing as it is to admit. But they weren't simply Harrison and Josephine or Harrison and Kate or even Kate and Josephine. They were Josephine, Harrison, and Katherine. The three of them made up a dynamic trio, one that won over the hearts of the world, and a trio that depended on one another more than they should.

He will sit in the passenger's seat on the ride home, right beside his mother, and he will have control over the aux cord. He won't fight over what game to play-- Kate and Harrison always want to play the same games, anyways. And he won't have Josephine looking at him like he's a nuisance when he does something that resembles their father. Her guidance, love, and friendship… He's not sure how he will go without it.

It's almost a twelve hour journey. They could have taken a train, or

even flown, but in all honesty, they needed the road trip. They needed every moment together. Every last chance to speak the unspoken.

Harrison was unsure what he was expecting when they pulled up on a large plot of land. At the center of it all, an ancient looking farmhouse. Two stories, a large front porch, enough dogs in the yard to start a dog shelter. When they clamber out of the car, Harrison is blown away by the immense expanse of land, the dozens of sheep, cattle, and goats out in the distance. A whole world of life he has never seen before.

Nana is squealing with delight, running from the house to greet them. Harrison is just another face among his family, getting a tight squeeze and a kiss to the cheek before she moves onto the next person. Kate grabs Harrison's elbow as Nana leads them inside to see the house.

Harrison forgot how thick her accent was. Mum used to sound similar, but steadily, the Scottish vocals have become more British, adopting a voice that wasn't her own. Harrison could barely understand a damn word Nana was saying.

His eyes were everywhere, looking at everything. He's never seen a life like this. So… ordinary. Eccentricism is so foreign to him-- he's used to historical portraits and couches older than his father, not personal crafts and actual photos. The mantle over the fireplace is overcrowded with photos and holiday cards from relatives. There's stuff everywhere. Not just books and busts, but knickknacks, and an abundance of things that represent them.

Harrison's eyes caught sight of a photo he didn't know existed. He approaches the table beside the staircase, arms around himself, bowing slightly to look at the frame. He's never seen it before, but the photo was so clearly him and his family. It had Harrison sat on Dad's hip, Kate on Mum's, and Josephine reaching up toward Harrison. All five of them were smiling. He doesn't remember this moment-- he must've been five at the oldest-- he felt the pang in his chest, realizing that it was, in fact, him. Mum, looking up at her husband and son, Kate, less than a year old, with only her front teeth but still giving a grin. He doesn't recognize the background, either.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He stood up straight again, looking over at his Nana. She was giving him this saddened smile, this look that she knew exactly what he was thinking.

"Where was this?" Harrison asks quietly. "If you don't mind me

asking."

"This was...." She plucks the frame off the table, squinting at the photo for a moment. She smiles. Harrison is concerned for the fingerprints that will be left on the glass of the frame. "The pumpkin patch, on Katie's first Halloween. We had to convince your father to come with, but he secretly had fun." She smiles, looking up at him. "You've grown since then." He nods once, not making eye contact. "I got some stuff for you. Don't you worry, I didn't forget you."

"What?" Harrison looks up, eyes following her as she sets the photo down again and skirts away. "Nan?"

"I'll show you later. Come eat. You're too skinny."

Harrison stands awkwardly beside his mother in the kitchen. He can't stop thinking about it all. The layer of dust on some of these decorative figures, the wilting plants, the scrapes and dents in the walls. There's so much life, so much character in this little house. He wonders what put the hole in the wall by the dining table, and what made the house smell like fresh grass and corn husk, and the last time someone scrubbed the grout in the backsplash tile. Theres a mat by the backdoor, absolutely covered in dirt, and piles of shoes in no particular order, all stained and muddy from hard-days at work.

It's so normal here. This is where Josephine is going to spend the rest of her life. In a traditional home, with traditional chores. There won't be an immense cleaning staff, or people catering every night, and she will have to do her own laundry.

He'll admit it… he's jealous.

Josephine knew the life she would be trapped in when she would be coronated. She would never escape the castles, the stiff, courteous, and controlling lifestyle. Harrison is happy she's escaping but he is lost in his head knowing that, in her avoidance, she cursed him to it instead. If she had children and held out until Gran died, Harrison would miss out entirely. He could be like his Uncle Arthur-- free to live whatever life he wants. Sure, the cameras will always follow him, the fame is always hung over his head, but he wouldn't be imprisoned by it.

He stands there, amongst the family Josephine will live with for the rest of her life, a family Josephine has loved since she was a child. It's his family too, but it didn't feel like it. By definition, sure. But really… they didn't belong to him at all. Harrison only ever met his

grandparents out of all the people here, and even then, they were brief passings, letters, and phone calls. He's never seen them in their element, in their own home.

He meets his uncles on his Mum's side for the first time, his cousins. He was unaware how many there were. Uncle Isaac, the oldest of Mum's brothers, then Uncle Cecil and Uncle Ellair. They all have children of their own. Wives. Some of them are grandparents themselves. His Nana and Poppa don't seem old enough to be great grandparents, but Uncle Isaac's eldest daughter is Josephine's age, and has a 2 year old son.

There's so many names, so many voices, so much together-ness in this one kitchen. They don't all fit at the table for dinner, so they have to eat outside.

Harrison is tragically out of place, he realizes. His uncles and Mum all cling to one another with loud laughter. He realizes after almost ten minutes of not understanding them, that they were mostly speaking Gaelic. Harrison forgot that Mum spoke it-- she adopts such a traditional London-accent at home, it's so easy to forget that she wasn't from there. Harrison sits alone at the stairs on the back porch, watching Mum burst into a fit of laughs over what must be her third glass of wine, Josephine under one arm. Kate fits in so naturally, too. That two year old cousin and her became fast friends. If anything, Kate made fast friends with all of their cousins. They all loved her immediately, like they've known her forever, and they were trying to teach her Gaelic, too.

He's not socializing with his cousins, his uncles, his grandparents. None of them know him, know what to even say to him. There is no divide with Katherine or Josephine. They are both almost guaranteed to have no place as a monarch. They are both distanced from royalty, both have a chance at normalcy. He sees it when Poppa looks at him, especially. Poppa, who was Mum's step dad, who married into this family and loved them like blood, who became royalty-adjacent because of it. A once normal man, now thrusted into the storm. They see a soon-to-be-king, not a grandson, or a cousin, or a nephew. They see a figurehead, not a family.

The food is so good, and fresh. Most of it is home grown. What isn't grown on their farm was purchased from other local farms. It's not a five star chef's recipe. It's made with heart and love, and made with a recipe that doesn't use measurements.

His family talks until the sun starts setting, and the air is too brisk to be outside still. Harrison is too fascinated by the sky, waiting for those damned stars Caleb keeps talking about. Everyone has either gone inside or gone home.

“It’s cold out,” Kate mentions quietly from behind him, stood in the doorway. “You coming in?”

“In a little bit,” Harrison nods, not looking at her. He trains his eyes on his folded hands, his fingers like ice. Kate frowns, looking over her shoulder at Mum and Josie, the two who alerted Kate to Harrison’s odd behavior. They both shift in their seats. Mum gets up, grabbing one of Harrison’s jackets from their belongings in one of the guest bedrooms. She hands it off to Kate, who slipped back outside. She sets the jacket over his shoulders. “Thanks.”

“Want me to sit with you?” Kate offers in a whisper. Harrison shook his head. “You sure?”

“I’m gonna call Caleb in a couple minutes. Don’t worry about it,” Harrison attempts a smile. She sees straight through it. She just nods, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “I’ll be in soon.”

“Tell him I said hi,” Kate murmurs back, patting his back before ducking back inside. Harrison could hear the sound of soft whispers just beyond the door, but he couldn’t hear what they were saying. Somehow, he knew it was about him.

He pulls out his phone, standing from the steps and walking deeper into the yard, away from his eavesdropping family and away from the dim porch lights. The sky was becoming darker and darker shades of blue. It looks just like a London night, the sky illuminated by city lights that never fully go dark. Except, the sky will go dark, and the lights will turn off, and Harrison will see an entire universe he’s never explored.

He calls his partner. For a moment, if even, he fears Caleb won’t pick up. Instead, he answers on the third ring.

“Hiya,” Caleb greets. “You in Scotland?”

“I am,” Harrison nods to himself, smiling at the sound of Eleanor’s voice in the background. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

“It’s never a bad time when you call,” Caleb responds. “Eleanor can you please -- no. No, it’s Harrison.”

“Hi Harrison!” Eleanor calls out from the background.

“Tell her I said hi,” Harrison cracks a sad smile, sitting down in the grass by the fencepost, his back against the splintering, weathered wood. Caleb passes along the message. “Everything going okay?”

“Not too bad,” he reassures. “A little tense. I won’t lie. But we’re… we’re gonna get over it. It’s a whole other story when my Dad comes down for Christmas.”

“You know I’m gonna be expecting frequent updates that you’re okay throughout that, right?” Harrison half teases. Caleb shakes his head with a smile.

“Enough about me. What’s it like up there?”

“Cold,” Harrison admits, puffing out a breath. He leaves it there for a long moment. Caleb gives him the space to think through his thoughts first. “I… I don’t know. I’m having a hard time, knowing we’re leaving without her. And I keep seeing everyone— this family, or, I guess, *my* family— and it’s all so different, and none of them like me. I just… I don’t know. I want to be here forever, because it looks so comfortable and like what a home should be, but I want to hide back in Kensington again, because my cousins look at me like I have three heads.”

“Do you know any of them?” Caleb asks back quietly.

“Barely?” He responds, twirling his fingers through the grass. “I never really saw my grandparents. We only wrote to each other. And I never met my Uncles or their families. But Josephine has, and Mum knows them more than she knows us, and Kate is easy to get along with… and I just sat there. And I see why Josie doesn’t want to stay but I don’t--I don’t think it’s fair that I have to step up in her place.”

“It’s not fair,” Caleb agrees quietly. “You should be able to make that decision for yourself. You still can.”

“And make Kate do it instead?” Harrison asks with a scoff. “I-I don’t know. I just… I’m missing a home I never had in the first place. My own little hiraeth…” Harrison sighs, eyes closing. “It’s just making me miss you.”

“It’s only been a couple of days,” Caleb reassures.

“I know,” Harrison insists. “I just… I don’t know. You’re everything

that makes this place good. You're-you're eccentric, and have so much depth, and character, and you got the divots and marks from a whole life you've lived, and you're loving and cozy and… I don't know."

"You don't know about me? Or about Scotland?" Caleb furrows his eyebrows.

"About anything," Harrison admits. There's a beat of silence. "I'm starting to think you're the only part that I do know."

His eyes flutter open. He looks up to the pitch black sky. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust, but once they do… he sees it.

It starts with a few light sparkles. But the longer he's looking, the more he sees. It's stunning. Unlike anything he's ever imagined. Like a million flecks of glitter splattered in the night sky.

"Which one is Orion's belt?" Harrison asks in a whisper.

"You see them?" Caleb's voice is instantly more excited. "Okay. Okay. So you're gonna look around and see a cluster of three right next to each other in a row. They'll be really really close-"

Harrison listens to Caleb map out the stars from memory, listens to his stories from the epics and the folktales that Harrison heard a million times in his lessons. Never have the Greeks been so fascinating. Never has science appealed to him as much as it did right now.

He's sat in this little eccentric farm that reminds him so much of Caleb. The character, and life, and stories to tell. The excitement and noise, but also the soft ebb and flow. The wind in the trees but also the rustling of chickens. Both the morning calm and the evening dinner calamity.

It wasn't Scotland that Harrison was dreaming of. It wasn't a future on this farmhouse, with a family he'd never met before. It was the future wherever Caleb would be. A future wherever his partner could be at his side. It could be Buckingham Palace, or Windsor Castle, or it could be at a humble home in the Scottish plains, where they know no one, where life can't bother them. He doesn't care. Long as Caleb is with him.

He's counting down the days until he's in Georgia. Even a day away felt like eternity.

Chapter End Notes

during the scotland part, i listened to All I Want by Kodaline and Mum by Luke Hemmings on repeat. I suggest rereading that segment with those songs on. It hurts infinitely more lmfao. ALSO, 10k chapter??? pog???

twitter heard it first but this damn piece is literally longer than both of the novels i published, and is almost the same length as both novels COMBINED. It has taken up literally 500 pages of google docs. It was also written in about a month and a half, all whilst jugging university, work, and health issues. I'm not sure if this makes me proud of this story or disappointed in my novels. A little bit of both, perhaps?

Anyways, i just wanted to tell yall that you've been reading a fic that is literally the length of two novels. Are you okay? You might need some therapy lmfao.

If I were to guess, either the next chapter is the last one, or the next chapter will be a short one, and the one after will be the finale. Thank you for sticking along with this hectic lil story. It's not my best work, but i tried, and i had fun writing it. so, let's do this one more time before we say farewell to these funky lil fictional dudes.

until the next update, friends :)

Chapter 23: Tomorrow

Chapter Summary

> And when tomorrow comes, and the world rears it's ugly head again...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The day his father died, Harrison didn't cry. Maybe that makes him sound heartless, kinda dick-ish, but that's fact.

The day Dad died was no different than the day before he died. They knew for four days that he was in his final hours. Every minute that passed where he was still alive felt like a mercy Dad didn't deserve, and yet, a torture that he did. Some sick, twisted, sadistic part of Harrison hopes Dad felt the pain, heard Harrison's indifference, and was aware that no one really cared. Sure, Mum was losing her husband. Josie, Harrison, and Kate were losing their father. But none of them would live their life any differently.

The sky was clear as any summer afternoon. No one had slept. Kate was weeping. She was overwhelmed and she hadn't slept properly in weeks. The noises, the movement, the franticness, it scared her. And, at the root of it all, there is the pain of losing someone you never really had-- the fear of accepting that their life would never be quite whole, because any opportunity they had at a father was gone.

That is precisely what Scotland felt like. The pain of losing a life that never belonged to him, and the fear of accepting that he will never have a chance at normalcy.

The news of Josephine's departure broke on day two, via a statement from Queen Helena, herself. It is publicized everywhere-- the front gates of Buckingham, every social media platform, newspapers, and information posted on royal.uk. Immediately, in the *About Prince Harrison* section is updated, his label no longer being *second son of Prince Charles and Duchess of Edinburgh, Euphemia.* He was now labeled as *heir to the throne* instead.

For the briefest of moments, he was elated to have the attention off of him. For merely an hour, no one thought about Harrison, or his dramas, but rather, why Josephine was abandoning England, and her

title. The hour was short lived at the realization of who would be to follow in the line of succession… Social media was a rampage. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram alike, all rallying for him to step down, too. Posts like *How is Harrison expected to lead in his condition?* and *Harrison is unfit to wear the crown. Perhaps his lifestyle is okay as prince, but the only queer king I can foresee belongs in drag.* He thinks the one that hurt the most was *all three of them are a shame to her majesty, their father, and their country. May Prince Charles rest in peace.*

That short hour of peace was broken. The attention is back on him. On all three of them, sure, but mostly him. Never has Harrison received so many death threats in his life. Instantly, the Royal Guard is reallocated in immense numbers. Montgomery arrived in a mere three hours to host an emergency meeting on Queen Helena's behalf. Nana was less than pleased by the armed soldiers now posted in her home, but if anything, she was more pissed about the strangers threatening her family's life.

It's day six of Scotland, 6:30 AM. Christmas was rapidly approaching, and the holidays only looked dimmer. Harrison hides in the horse stables to avoid the slowly waking farmhouse, the soldiers, and Monty, who has been on phone calls back to back since arriving here.

Harrison makes fast friends with a horse named Archie. Archie was approximately four years old, 1000 lbs, and pure heart. Harrison took a liking to the brown and white mare early. He's not sure why. There wasn't much special or extraordinary about him. They just liked each other. Archie took an immediate trusting to Harrison, and anxiously awaits a good petting when Harrison stops by the stables. Harrison has been standing at his stall for almost half an hour, running his hand along Archie's snout and over his fluffed hair.

"Your lady hasn't slept since she got here," Nana tells him, standing in the doorway to the stable.

"Monty?" Harrison assumes. "She's like that. Runs on about two hours of sleep, a lot of coffee, and willpower."

"A good woman," Nana comments, inching closer. "She loves you."

"You think?" Harrison offers a half smile. Nana nods. "She's been around since before I was born. Good thing-- I think I'd be dead by now without her." Nana is quiet, watching him interact with her youngest mare. She glances at her own prized beauty-- a blond Akhal-Teke named Sol, and grabs her riding geer.

“Wanna take ‘im for a ride?” Nana offers. Harrison hesitates, looking up at Archie again. He hasn’t ridden in over a year. Not since last fall, before Dad got too sick to do much of anything. He looks toward the house, full of people, of staff, and family, and people he neither liked nor disliked. He would kill to get away from it for even a moment. “Saddle up, honey. You know what you're doing?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harrison nods, going through the tasks to get Archie properly set up.

They don’t go far. They trot through the fields, silent, reminiscing on almost an entire week of being together. Not once have they spoken about, well, anything. Not Josephine, or Harrison being heir, or Caleb. Harrison is unsure what to say to her, or anyone else. None of them care for his presence, so he just sits silently most days, hidden in a corner, out of sight, out of mind.

The sun starts to rise over the hills. The clouds are pink and orange with reflecting light. The rolling hills are stunning in the morning sun, frosted over with frozen dew.

“Things are getting serious,” she says finally. Harrison nods. “Are you scared?”

“Maybe?” He admits. “Does that make me a coward?”

“Heavens, no,” Nana chides. “Cowardice would be if you hid the rest of your life away from the crowds in the most desolate part of Scotland out of fear of the unknown.”

Harrison shot his attention toward her, eyebrows furrowed. “Josie isn’t weak.”

“But she’s not strong, either,” Nana presses. Harrison begins to argue, but she silences him. “There is no shame in cowardice and weakness, Harry. There is plenty of shame in not *accepting* your weakness, though.”

“...I don’t understand,”

“I know you don’t, mo ghràdh,” Nana hums. “I love your sister, and I love her presence, and I am excited to spend the rest of my years with her here. But she did not choose this out of the goodness of a granddaughter’s heart. She didn’t come north to take care of me, or the animals when I am gone. She came because she was scared. She accepted that she couldn’t handle the life she was given. She

understood that she was not strong enough to fill your grandmother's shoes. She knows that, and she wears that badge with pride." Harrison frowns, focusing on the trail ahead of them as Archie leads them by a field of wheat. "She told me… what, ten years ago now? She told me she didn't want this life. She didn't want to put in the work, or fight the press, or dilute herself. So she ran here, and she will hide here until her name is nothing but a memory."

A memory? Will history forget Josephine? Will the history books scratch out her name and replace it with Harrison's? Has she left a sour enough taste in their mouths that they will omit her future?

"Your father was weak, and a coward, and a shame to my family," Nana states coldly. "He saw suffering. He saw fear, and loneliness, and he did not own it. He didn't indulge his children in his hardships. He damaged my daughter, instilled doubt, fear, and pain into my grandchildren. He did not teach you to accept your weakness and grow, but rather, taught you that weakness was punishable. That you deserve to be treated poorly, unjustly, and that couldn't be further from the truth."

Harrison is quiet, fascinated by the wisdom cooped into a woman he barely knew, the life lessons and teachings that have sat in her mind for who knows how long. She didn't see her grandchildren grow and learn. She did not teach them the lessons she taught her children. Perhaps, she didn't teach her children at all, and she wants to learn from her mistakes.

"You love that boy?" Nana asks finally. Harrison nods. "Enough to love him well? For the rest of your life?"

"Longer than that," Harrison confirms.

"Good," she approves. "Damn the press. Damn the media. And Damn your grandmother. Not a single one of them taught you right. Because you shouldn't have to be complicit. You should not have to take the hits. You should be out there, telling the world it can kiss your arse for how it's treated you. Tell me: what matters more? Your image, constructed by generations of traditions that didn't serve anyone well? Or your life, raw and authentic as it is when you are in the streets of London, or parties in America, sided by a boy you will love for longer than forever?"

He's starting to understand now.

"You don't belong to the people, Harrison. You are yours alone. How

dare you placate yourself? How dare you dilute your strength? You are full of nothing short of possibility."

"Nan, they'll… they'll kill me," Harrison whispers, one last effort at cowardice.

"Try as they might. They may kill your body, but only you can kill your soul."

Dammit .

"Either buck up, or get off my horse. I only have room in my house for one weak grandchild right now."

They ride on.

Back at the ranch, everyone is awake again. Josephine has begun her morning chores happily, and Mum cooks breakfast with Kate. All three instantly look at Harrison and Nana when they come in.

"Where'd you troublemakers run off to this morning?" Mum asks.

"Mind your business, Phee," Nana says, whacking her with a wooden spoon.

"Mam, he's my son -"

"He's my grandson, Euphemia," Nana quips back. "I don't go telling all our conversations to your father."

"Go on, tell the gravestone all my secrets," Mum smirks, earning another smack. "Ow! Mama!"

"Shut your whining. Harrison, honey, you take her place. Let me teach you how to cook an omelette-"

Caleb has known since early on that the media was not his friend.

He was fifteen when he had his first major article written about him. It was a segment in some major magazine that was blasted across the nation, titled *Meet the Future First Family* . It was immediately after Dad announced his campaign, and he instantly had a significant following. The polls from the very start swayed toward the Chapman favor, and the media tore at every detail they could and blasted it to the world.

He remembers that cold feeling running down his spine, seeing his

school photo and a two page spread about who he was as a person. They talked about his grades, his medical history, his friends—anything they could get their hands on. His once quiet Instagram page skyrocketed to a following of hundreds of thousands. People dug through his social media, commenting on posts from 2010, until he went through and deleted it all, creeped out by the obsession over his life that came from the American people.

He recalls feeling conflicted at school in the following weeks. It was nice being popular, and liked, and feeling like he was taking charge of his life. But the kids at school saw him from this new perspective; his own friends too.

He recalls how invasive it felt, digging up everything down to his health history. Like an invasion of privacy. It was the first time he felt like his life wasn't his own.

His experience with the media has only gone downhill since. Of course, there's two sides to every coin. He's sure there's news centers that aren't vultures looking for his decaying corpse. But it feels like all he does is get targeted, over, and over, and over again.

Since going public with Harrison, and Josephine's abdication, Caleb was almost hopeful for a moment of freedom, a breath of air. A chance to resurface.

It's Christmas Eve. He and Dad have been on opposite sides of the property all day, and Caleb is counting down the moments until Harrison is here. He's in the sun room with both of his sisters, who were watching some Christmas cartoon, while Caleb was texting Harrison, who was just about sick of Scotland now.

He gets a text from Diya first.

Diya Hadid: i swear i didn't know. If i did, i would have told you.

Diya Hadid: im so sorry

Caleb furrows his eyebrows, glancing up at his sisters, then out the window to his father, who was moseying around the garden after Grandma, who was putting him to work, just like everyone else. He goes to text Diya back before he gets another text.

Quinn: holy shit dude i had no idea. what the fuck is wrong with her? call me when you get the chance.

Caleb's heart plummets. As if second nature, he swipes to Twitter and refreshes the trending page. Right at the top, accompanied by a photo of Caleb, Annika, Harrison, and Josephone at Josephine's birthday party, the headline: *Photographer of leaked llewd photos revealed to be close White House and British Royalty friend Annika Beattie .*

Caleb sits upright suddenly, clicking on the top article.

Double Agent: Beattie Family revealed as the source for the Prince Harrison and Caleb Chapman leak.

There are many theories that point to Annika Beattie being tied to the recent situation with Harrison and Caleb-

Caleb keeps skimming the text. For a moment, he thinks it's just an opinion article that went too far, that they were theorizing things they knew nothing about. But then they link a Tweet from Annika's own account:

@AnnikaBeattie: *I'm not proud of my actions these past few weeks, but the people deserve truth. I sacrificed a lot by collecting the images and compiling the leak, but it was for the benefit of our nations, not out of hatred. I hope my friends find themselves safe and happy in their endeavors.*

No way…

He's nauseous. He stands up from the couch, pacing away, and calls Annika. It goes to voicemail after a couple rings. His sisters are reading the news as he does.

"No- no, she-she wouldn't," Ellie argues. "She's not like that. She wouldn't do that to us."

"She tweeted-" Bridgette murmurs, skimming the message and scowling. " *She* risked a lot? Are you fucking kidding me? Hang on-"

Voicemail again.

"Annika, answer your fucking phone. You owe me the bare minimum of fucking facing me like an adult," Caleb snaps at the answering machine. "Fuck-"

He runs a hand over his face, letting out a loud groan.

"Buddy…" Bridgette frowns. "There's… there's gotta be some kind of

explanation. Surely. This isn't like her. This isn't…"

How many years has he known Annika as a friend, as family? He ran the streets of Atlanta with her. He stole candy bars and snuck refills of slurpees from 7/11 with her. He jumped the fences and hung out on playgrounds well after midnight with her. They've confessed their fears of an uncertain future in the safety of each other. When Caleb had no one, he had Annika and Quinn. He had a home with his best friends. Part of him can't help but fear that he was doomed for failure in every friendship as a whole. He wonders how long before he loses Quinn, too.

He wants to cry. He wants to ask "how could she?". But he's afraid he already knows the answer.

He recalls sitting on the beach of a lake house, similar to the one he currently hides himself in. He recalls Annika's broken heart as she confessed her lacking future in journalism, how her father hated the media that only seems to damage the Beattie name, and that Annika was "too attached to politics" to be a just journalist, unbiased as any good correspondent should be.

She found her in. She found her balance.

She captured private moments. She sat back, knowing their weaknesses, and she exploited all of them. She's living her dream as a well named journalist, at the cost of her friends. No matter the cost, no matter the loss, she wanted in.

Her father is proud of her. She now has her career, and it's founded in the downfall of the Chapman name. She obliterates people from her own party, and in the meantime, helps her father's success in his campaign.

Caleb wonders if any of their interactions have been authentic. He wonders how long she's been a friend, and how long she's been preying on his weaknesses. These past few months, it's guaranteed that she was only there for her own benefit, collecting her story. But what about the years prior? Were his late night confessions of uncertainty ever safe? Was she ever listening? Or just hearing the next publishable story?

He wants to talk to her, and he wants to talk to Harrison, and he even wants to speak with Dad. But most of all: he wants to be alone.

He quietly excuses himself from the room with his sisters. They let

him go without argument. He leaves his phone there in the sunroom. He has decided he needs to detach from it all. From his family, his friends-- or, he guesses, friend . All he has left is Quinn. He even needs a moment away from Harrison. He just needs a breath of fresh air, a moment of solitude.

Mom must have found out, because she's walking swiftly toward him, trying to call out, talk it through. And Grandma is trying to reassure him that it was all okay. He flinches away when Grandma holds his wrist.

"I need- I need a minute," he says. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Honey-" Mom pleads. "Baby, you don't have to run away every time-"

He grabs his keys and closes the door behind him.

He doesn't drive anywhere specific. He just drives. He makes a trip around the perimeter around the lake, and hops on the highway, and he drives into Altha, and then he loops around toward Chattahoochee. He just drives. Eventually, he finds himself parked in a random parking lot in a random plaza in a random town. His head rests against the steering wheel, and he lets it hit him.

He cries quietly. He's not sure how long he does. He just knows the sun sets before he's done. He knows he's probably missing Christmas Eve dinner. He knows he's nauseous, and has a headache, and he misses his normal life.

He is so in love with Harrison, and he loves loving Harrison, but *God* , he misses his old life. He misses being a wild child who got in trouble every other day, who was constantly in a balance between bombing his classes and passing with flying colors. He misses football, and knocking heads with his thick skulled friends, and he misses when his number one responsibility was making sure his room was clean, or else he and Dad would get into a massive fight that will inevitably blow up in their faces.

He remembers being young, and wishing he would just grow up already. He remembers hating his life in Atlanta, because the school treated him weird, and he ran into sketchy people on the streets, and he would never be able to go too deep into the city without hearing the deafening bang of a firearm. But fuck… adulthood sucks too.

How much of his life will he waste being miserable?

His dash says it's nearing midnight. His headache only worsened with time, and his eyes were sore. His tears ran dry, and he chewed his cheeks raw, and his throat hurt from aching sobs.

He comes home to a silent house. Everyone has turned in for bed, but he expected that. He takes a scalding hot shower, until his skin is red and feels like it's on fire, and his body feels like mush. Looking in the mirror, he rakes a hand through his damp hair and over his eyes, puffy and red. He sniffles, shaking off his nerves and pain.

He grabs his phone before going to bed. He sees a lot of texts, a lot of missed calls. He weighs his options, looking between his bed, and his phone. He texts back Quinn a soft reassurance that he was okay, and he flops down into the mattress.

He barely sleeps a wink.

Christmas sucks for both Harrison and Caleb.

Neither of them have a full minute of freedom to call each other. They text back and forth at any available opportunity, but their conversation doesn't get much further than *Merry Christmas* or *i love you* .

Harrison is busy with a family he didn't know, keeping up with traditions he's never experienced. His time left with Josephine is limited. He drives home to England before dawn tomorrow, and he can't fathom what the rest of his life will look like. He's trying to imagine what he will do now that she's not with him. He knows Mum will only become infinitely more involved in his life, now that she no longer had Josephine to dote over. Kate will never leave him alone, now that Josephine won't be right down the hall to pester instead. And then there's the responsibility of the hierarchy. He's next in line, and he can only imagine the work he will be left with, now that Josephine isn't responsible for any of it.

Caleb is busy with a family he didn't want to be around. It had nothing to do with his grandparents, or siblings, or even his father. He just didn't want to be here. He wanted to be in bed, under thick comforters, listening to the birds sing and the wind bustle. He wanted to smell lavender and expensive cologne, to be neither alone nor crowded. His family are walking on eggshells. No one knows what to say. Even Dad is unsettled. No one wants to make Christmas about politics, but every other topic has been discussed. No one makes eye contact with him, but everyone wants him to be okay.

Christmas couldn't go past them quick enough.

On the twenty sixth, it's just another story. Harrison is coming back to the UK, and there's an article circulating of Caleb having a breakdown on Christmas Eve. Caleb decides against leaving his bedroom that day. He just sleeps, and sleeps, and sleeps some more. On the drive home, Harrison tries calling Caleb to keep him company, but he doesn't answer. He tries again after a couple hours and gets a tired response.

"Hey," Harrison greets gently, letting out a breath of relief. Mum turns down the radio and Kate sits forward from the backseat, both waiting for an update, too. "You there?"

"Yeah," Caleb mumbles through his exhaustion. "Trying to sleep."

"I'm sorry," Harrison frowns, sinking in his seat. "Did I wake you?"

"No," he yawns. "I've been tossing and turning."

"You sure?" Harrison cracks a sad smile. Caleb hums in response. "Want me to hang up so you can sleep?"

"No," he says again, rustling in the background. Caleb gets up, running a hand over his face. He needs to eat. It's getting close to two in the afternoon. "How much longer until you're home?"

"We are almost to Leicester, so… two and a half hours?" Harrison looks to his mother for confirmation. She nods. "I just have to sit in on a couple meetings tomorrow, and then I will be flying out first thing Saturday. Kate will be flying over Monday night, into Tuesday."

"Good," Caleb hums in response, shuffling through the creaky hallways, skirting past his older sister on the stairwell. "Ellie is getting excited to see you guys again. I didn't realize it's been so long since they saw each other."

"It's been a while," Harrison confirms. "She wasn't there for Halloween."

"Lucky little shit," Caleb scoffs, murmuring a soft *excuse me* as he wiggled into the kitchen. "Next Halloween will be better."

"It will be," Harrison confirms.

"Who are you talking to?" Eleanor asks curiously from the background. "Caleb. Caleb. Caleb. Dude. Hey. Hey. Who are you

talking to?”

“It’s Harrison- can you please- Ellie! ” Caleb smacks Eleanor away. “You’re being a brat. Fuck off.”

“Watch your mouth!” Grandma calls from the background.

“Oh my God I swear-” Caleb mutters. “Maybe I should come to you instead.”

“No! No, I want to see Harrison-” Eleanor insists, hanging from his arm. “Let me say hi!”

“Oh my- Eleanor . Chill out, you rabid squirrel,” Caleb snaps. She scowls at him.

“You’re not the only one who cares about them-”

“Ellie Jean, will you please stop harassing him?” Mom shouts from the other room. Eleanor goes quiet.

“I’m going back to bed,” Caleb determines, marching back up toward his room and flopping onto his mattress again. “Keep talking. I’m sorry. It’s a small house and a lot of people. Nowhere is safe.”

“You’re fine,” Harrison smiles softly. “I’m stuck in a car with Kate and my Mum for another couple hours. I get it.”

“You love us,” Kate teases. Mum pinches his cheek. He waves them away.

“Two days,” Caleb says with a loud sigh. “Then you’re stuck with me.”

Those two days fly by.

Harrison works all of Friday to ensure he’s not busy while he’s away. He sits in a four hour long meeting with his grandmother and Mum, he has a meeting with Kate about their “updated duties” now that the torch has been passed down. He is assigned his own assistant, which felt weird at first, until he realizes that his assigned assistant was Madame Montgomery herself. Not much would change in that sense.

Caleb spends his Friday being miserable. He talked to Quinn for a good few hours that night about his fears, and he let Quinn make a promise that he wouldn’t betray him like Annika did. It’s hard to believe, but he chose to anyway, because he can’t afford to lose another friend.

Saturday is tense in the Grey-Chapman household. Caleb wakes up to Dad, Grandpa Pete, and Grandpa all arguing in the kitchen. The three men were shouting at each other, not making any sense. Mom was holding her head on the porch, Grandma running a hand over her shoulders, murmuring her love for her child. Caleb folds his arms around himself, chilled by a waterfront breeze.

“What happened?” Caleb asks quietly.

“Nothing,” Mom sniffles, running a hand over her face. “Don’t worry about it. Today’s gonna be a good day.”

Caleb is quiet. He looks between Grandma and Mom, then flinches at some rather colorful slurs thrown around in the kitchen, proving Mom’s statement false.

“Don’t let your father discourage you, darling,” Grandma whispers, hand reaching toward him. He takes a small step away. “Caleb…”

“If I’m going to cause a problem, tell me,” Caleb says quietly. “And tell me now. Before he gets here, so I can get a hotel for us to stay in.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Mom insists. “Honey… it’s going to be fine. I’ll figure something out.”

“This is ridiculous. You know that, right?” Caleb asks her. Mom looks down at her hands and away from him. “You know, the last time we spoke, you were just there. You were crying and apologizing and trying to figure out how to make it up to me. And it’s been almost a month now, Mom. And this is the first thing you say to me? You’ll figure something out?”

That night in his bedroom was a hard one. He was dizzy, and in pain. His hands were thick with gauze. Mom was hugging his skull to her chest, and Caleb wanted them all to just stop touching him. Caleb hates touch. Hates when people touch his hair, or hands, or back. Only Harrison can, because somehow, he’s made touch feel tender, rather than prickly.

“We’re past that, Mom. You should have figured something out when you saw your kid getting wailed on,” Caleb reminds. “Lord knows everyone else did.”

“It’s not that easy -“

“Why not?” Caleb shot back. “Because you’re on his side?”

“Not at all!” Mom argues. “You don’t know what you’re saying-“

“Because you’re scared?” Caleb asks next. She hesitates. “Guess what? I’m scared too. I’m fucking terrified. Every movement I make is televised. My father hates me. I’m hiding at Grandma’s house because I’ve been exiled from my own family. One of my best friends outed me to the entire world. I’ve-I’ve gotten hurt, and it sucks, but I don’t get another option. Unlike you, I have to do this. Pull yourself together. This isn’t about you.”

With that, he walks away.

He lays on the dock in a sweatshirt too big for him, the hood over his head and the string in his mouth to chew on. He uses his arm as a cushion, his knees swaying and listening to the rumbling storms overhead. Eventually, the yelling stops. Someone comes to find him. He and Andy crack a beer, the two drinking silently despite it being literally 1:00PM.

“What did Dad decide on?” Caleb asks through a yawn, setting down the now empty bottle.

“He’s decided to keep his mouth shut to prevent Grandpa from beating him over the head with his cane,” Andy murmurs back. Caleb scoffs. “And Grandpa Pete left.”

“Of course,” Caleb chuckles softly. “Mother fucker has to have the last word. Just like his son.”

“Ever the dramatics with the Chapman boys,” Andrew agrees. Caleb is quiet. They sit in a peaceful silence for a long few minutes.

When Andrew finishes his beer, he can’t help but study his little brother. He was seven when Caleb was born. He was already a big brother to Bridgette, and in all honesty, he was dreading another baby. He felt the same way about Danny and Eleanor at first, too. Andy can’t help but think about the past twenty years of bickering, the past twenty years of wishing he was an only child, of blaming all his problems on his siblings, of screaming matches and brawls that always ended in bruises and a little blood. And yet, here he was. And he cannot name anyone more important than his siblings. His little brother means the world to him, no matter how dramatic, and annoying he gets.

“I want you to be the best man at my wedding,” Andy tells him. For a moment, Andy thinks Caleb didn’t hear him. Caleb just sits there,

unphased. “If you’re up for it. I have Danny as a groomsman. I have a couple buddies at the party. But I think-“

“Why?”

“…huh?”

“Why do you want me to be the best man?” Caleb asks. “Because if it’s out of guilt-“

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Andy rolls his eyes. “No. It’s not that. It’s because I fucking love you, and I miss you.”

“I met Frankie a few days ago.”

“And she adores you,” Andy shot back. “Who else would I pick? Who on Earth is a better fit than you?”

“You have a million friends that could-“

“Half of them are colleagues at best,” Andy shot back. “And they would throw a stripper themed bachelors party.”

“I could,” Caleb cracks a small smile.

“Don’t.”

“Aye aye, captain,” Caleb nods. “No strippers. Lots of alcohol.”

“If that’s the case, we have to go to another country where you can legally drink, so we don’t get flamed by the media.”

“I was recently outed for having a relationship with the Prince of England. You think I’m worried about underage drinking articles?”

“Yes. Because it’s illegal,” Andy deadpans.

“Fuck the law,” Caleb shot back.

“Shut the hell up, man. You’re an idiot,” Andy rolls his eyes. “Are you in or not?”

“I’m in, I’m in,” he reassures. “I’ll do it.”

“No strippers,” Andy says again.

“No strippers,” Caleb confirms. “You and I both have a better deal

than someone you have to pay to take their clothes off."

"Ugh- Caleb ," Andy groans, smacking his shoulder. Caleb rolls his eyes. "I miss when you were little and didn't talk."

"I talked. You just didn't listen," Caleb shrugs. "Just go back to that. It worked well. You and I-"

"Caleb!" Grandma calls from the back porch. "I think he's here!"

"Shit," Caleb curses, pushing himself upright. Andy breaks out in a small smile at the abrupt energy that came from his little brother. "Grab the bottle for me-?"

"Just go, doofus," Andy chuckles, shaking his head. "I got it. We'll talk more later."

Caleb mouths a thank you and takes off down the dock again. He nearly trips his way up the porch stairs he's stumbled over a dozen times, and he has to try and wiggle through a narrow kitchen and hallway full of people. He gets to the front of the house, just as Eleanor was going toward the door. Caleb pushes her out of the way.

Harrison was two steps away from coming up the stairs. He looks beautiful as ever, but that was no surprise. Button down, top button undone, a blazer. Slacks. A shiny watch. His hair is fluffy and waved. He looked both soft and sharp. Amazing how he can be everything, all at once.

Caleb doesn't stop. Harrison lets out a loud laugh as Caleb tackles him into a crushing hug. Harrison stumbles back a couple steps, fingers weaving through Caleb's hair, an arm around his waist. Caleb buries his face into Harrison's neck, squeezing tight.

"Hi, love," Harrison murmurs against his ear amusedly. "God, I missed you."

"I missed you," Caleb croaks back.

He hadn't realized how much emotion built in the two weeks separation. They've gone longer, but now… every day felt like an eternity. They worked their ass off to be together, and Caleb wants to take advantage of every second of that togetherness . He could sink to his knees and sob. He could kiss every inch of Harrison's skin, top to bottom, and then do it again. He could say a million words of exhaustion and fear, but it wouldn't be enough.

Harrison, though, is.

Harrison is perfectly enough.

Harrison pulls away ever so slightly, a hand on Caleb's face, tracing his cheek. He smiles gently, studying the way Caleb's green eyes storm with the skies, how his cheeks redden furiously, his fingers curling into the fabric of Harrison's clothes. Caleb's eyes flutter closed as Harrison presses a warm kiss to his forehead. He pulls away when he hears Eleanor coming out to greet him, too.

"Hey," Harrison chuckles, letting her hug him. "Are you behaving?"

"Never," Caleb cracks a grin, ruffling her hair. She bats him away. "Same trouble, different day."

"Shut up, loser," Eleanor shot back. "Alright, your highness. What first? Wanna see the lake? Or go for a walk to the neighbors farm? They have cows-"

Caleb grabs Harrison's stuff. Harrison tries to take it, but Caleb only lets him carry his backpack. Caleb follows behind him with a smile, unable to look away from such a perfect sight: his baby sister and his favorite person.

For Caleb, it's an awkward introduction. Harrison is confident as ever. He shakes Grandma and Grandpa's hands and shines his perfect smile. Grandma coos over how handsome he is and how precious his accent was. Caleb drops Harrison's stuff by their room before coming back in hopes to save them from something tense. When he comes back downstairs, though, he sees Harrison stood with Grandpa and Eleanor, who were showing him pictures. Caleb settles against the bannister and smiles.

"He must've been… hm… Ellie, how old was Caleb for this?" Grandpa calls to the kitchen.

"Six or seven!" Grandma calls back, coming through the doorway with another photo. Caleb blushes, realizing the photo they were showing. One from a waterpark when he was little, a day spent with Grandma, Grandpa, Bridgette, and Danny. Andy was working that day, and Eleanor wasn't born yet. "Surely he's shown you this one-"

"Oh my God," Harrison laughs, happily taking the frame and squinting. "That's not him."

“Sure is,” Nana confirms. “Caleb, honey, how old were you when you had those big ol’ glasses of yours?”

“Oh God,” Caleb groans. “Like… fifteen?”

“Do you still need glasses?” Harrison asks, aghast. “Oh you were so cute… Love, your stupid little shirt-“

“It was in style, leave me alone,” Caleb argues. “No. We thought I did but they didn’t work.”

“In style?” Harrison raises an eyebrow. “Darling, that was the style in 2005.”

“You would know. You were probably fifteen by then-“

“I am only three years older than you,” Harrison scoffs. “Get over here. Stop hiding on the stairs. Who are you, Harry Potter?”

Caleb inches closer. Grandma and Grandpa are both trying to tell a story about Universal Studios, fueled by Harrison’s *Harry Potter* reference. Their way of telling stories never fails to make Caleb smile. They talk over each other, but finish each other’s sentences, and together, they tell the entire story in a way they never would be able to alone.

They sit on the couch together. Grandpa sinks into his chair and Grandma on the arm of it, holding Grandpa’s hands as they recount stories of their adventures with their five grandchildren over the years. They both smile so fondly, both talk so happily about every moment, Caleb almost forgets all the bad that took place in between these stories.

Caleb sits back on the couch, tracing over Harrison’s straight shoulders, down the path of his spine, a track Caleb has committed to memory. Harrison is sat so perfectly proper… Caleb is concerned for him. He wants to see his shoulders relax, his chin tip back down, his back slouch slightly. He’s always so on edge.

When they freed Harrison from their storytelling, the storm began to pick up outside, meaning their walk on the lake was off the table. Harrison follows Caleb upstairs to properly settle any of his necessary stuff for the next few days before they drive down to Atlanta. Harrison leans in the doorway of the bedroom, surveying the space with curious eyes.

“This is adorable,” Harrison admits in a whisper.

“Nothing like Kensington, that's for sure,” Caleb cracks a small smile, carefully making his bed and folding up a blanket. “You gonna come in? Or just stand there and look pretty?”

“I’m good at looking pretty,” Harrison cracks a small grin. Caleb rolls his eyes.

“Get in here.”

Harrison takes another step in. Caleb isn’t very far— the room is small enough that with just a couple small steps, Harrison is in arms reach. Harrison breaks out in a large grin as Caleb takes hold of his face and kisses him.

Two weeks is too long without a kiss.

Harrison pushes up on his toes and meets him halfway. His fingers creep under Caleb’s hoodie, his other hand wrapped around and gripping the strings to his sweatshirt. They break for a brief moment.

“You taste like alcohol,” Harrison murmurs softly, a hint of concern laced in his tone.

“And you taste like an ashtray. Shut the hell up and kiss me,” Caleb shot back. *Fair enough.* Harrison meets him feverishly for open mouthed kisses, the familiarity of his tongue, his teeth, his hot breath. His grip tightens. Harrison would live in this moment forever if he could. It’s so much warmer here than being alone in England, or riding in Scotland. He’s physically warmer, and he feels infinitely better, right here.

Caleb pulls away first, forehead touching Harrison’s, their noses brushing against one another’s. Harrison traces the hairline at the base of Caleb’s neck, brushing his lips over Caleb’s cheekbone.

“Wanna talk about it?” Harrison offers in a whisper. Caleb is quiet. “Later?” A small nod. “Okay…”

Caleb sinks down onto the edge of the bed. Harrison stands between his knees, hugging Caleb’s head to his abdomen, fluffing his hair and running a hand over his back. Caleb’s hands are gentle against Harrison’s hips and legs, holding him softly, with little other intention than to just be close to him. He was so tired. He doesn’t want to do anything other than this. Caleb listens to the thumping of Harrison’s

heart, his flowing bloodstream, focusing on the soft touch on his head and back. Touch that feels feather light and loving, rather than like getting hit with a cactus.

“We’re okay,” Harrison reminds in a soft whisper. “I got you.” Caleb nods, taking a slow breath in. “Hi, love…”

“It’s thundering!” Ellie shouts up the stairs happily, interrupting them. “C’mon! Come watch!”

Harrison chuckles, retracting slightly. He presses one last kiss to Caleb’s lips before letting him stand.

Caleb drags Harrison with him downstairs. Or, perhaps, he was using Harrison as armor. No matter what happens, nothing can hurt that much with Harrison here.

They sit on the back porch with Caleb’s little siblings for the brunt of the storm. Harrison curls up under Caleb’s arm on the porch swing, Caleb fidgeting with Harrison’s fingers and smiling with every distant bolt of lightning. Harrison found it adorable-- the way they would see a bright flash , and all start counting until the thunder would rumble overhead. Bridgette comes outside, waving around her lightning tracker on her phone.

“One of them struck Mr. Robinson’s farm-” Bridgette says.

“I hope the chickens are in,” Ellie says back, smiling at a visibly closer strike that rang loud in their ears, just across the lake. Harrison jumps slightly, breaking out in a small smile. “Woah!”

Swaying on the swing, snuggled up close, Harrison looks up at Caleb and smiles. He likes this look on him. Relaxed. Comfortable. He was in a hoodie that made him look infinitely more cozy, his hair slightly more tousled. He doesn’t have that fake smile and confidence that he wears around in DC or London. He’s at home here. Maybe on edge, but this is as true as he gets.

It reminds him a lot of Scotland, in the way the Chapmans all so comfortably settle in. Harrison likes the way the floorboards creak, and the wine stains on the carpet, and the smell of eucalyptus and citrus cleaners. The screen door is squeaky and rusted. The dining room is a tight squeeze for everyone, but barely fits them all. There’s paint buckets and tools lying about from an attempt at updating the house in his grandparents’ retirement.

Caleb's grandparents call for dinner. Harrison squeezes in between Caleb and Eleanor. Caleb's arm is draped across Harrison's chair, fingers tracing shapes on Harrison's shoulder. He keeps laughing with his siblings, and keeps smiling at his grandparents. Harrison takes note of two weeks of change. The scars on his hands faded. His lip is healed over. The bruises are gone. He looks just as tired, and a little more scruffy, but he smiles easily.

"Harrison, honey, I heard you've been in Scotland. How was that?" Grandma asks him. Harrison blinks a couple times, blushing at the sudden attention on him. Caleb raises an eyebrow, squeezing his shoulder.

"It was beautiful," Harrison responds. "It was my first time meeting some of my family. A pleasant change of pace."

"I can only imagine what your day-to-day looks like," she sits forward on her elbows, hands clasped in front of her. Caleb smirks slightly, remembering a day when his poor table manners was excruciating for Harrison to bear. "So, I appreciate you making the trip out to us. It's high time we met you. God knows my grandson is not the most open book. Trying to get any details from the boy is like pulling teeth."

"New topic," Caleb decides. "There are infinitely better things to discuss-"

"Ah-ah, no. Don't you interrupt me," Grandma scolds. "Harrison, honey, let's talk about this Georgia trip. Is he takin' care o' you for all this? You boys got a plan?"

"Mom, leave him be," Mom insists from the other end of the table.

"No, no, please. I'm just as interested," Dad insists. Caleb clenches his jaw, glaring at his father. Harrison sits straighter, if possible. Just by speaking, Dad had coaxed an attitude from Harrison again. What was casual has suddenly become some mixture of cocky, formal, and spiteful.

"We have a plan," Harrison insists. "We've been planning a good Georgia trip since… probably June, right love?" Harrison cracks a small smirk toward Caleb at the flared rage from President Chapman. "You've done nothing but tell me about how much you love it here. And we've only planned more in depth in these past few weeks. I know we're gonna go up to Atlanta on Tuesday, when Kate flies in, then maybe come back down and spend the New Year in Disney." Caleb flickers his attention between Harrison and his father.

“ *Disney. Harry Potter World* . You know, the whole thing. Really letting him see down south,” Caleb contributes. “I already told you guys I was stealing Ellie for a couple days.”

“I didn’t approve of-”

“I did. Hush,” Mom waves Dad off. “Are you going to stay in the Atlanta house?”

“God, no,” Caleb shook his head. Mom raises an eyebrow. “Andy can probably agree. It’s a little awkward bringing your partner to your childhood home when it still looks like you’re thirteen.”

“God knows I wasn’t sharing a twin mattress with Frankie,” Andy chuckles, taking a sip of his drink. “You gonna pop by Ma’s?”

“Please!” Ellie perks up instantly. “Oh my God-- I haven’t seen Ma in years. And her hot chocolate?”

“I already made plans with Finch,” Caleb confirms.

“Oh, tell Mary Ann I said hi,” Grandma says with a fond smile. “She’s gonna love you, Harry. That woman was like a second Momma to Beatrice, and all of these little buttheads. She’ll make you feel right at home.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Harrison attempts a smile, squeezing Caleb’s thigh. “I’m excited to see it all. I just know he’s happy to be back at home again, and I’m happy to see him happy.”

“How cute,” Grandpa coos. “Alright. I’m gettin’ us all drinks. Harrison, what you want?” Harrison blinks a couple times, unsure. Caleb rolls his eyes.

“He drinks Corona,” Caleb says for Harrison, standing. “Let me help you, Pops-”

“You better. I only got two hands.”

Caleb and Grandpa bring the adults the drinks they know they’d like. Grandpa even lets Caleb grab himself a beer-- something they would never allow, unless they were in another country. It’s always Andy or Bridgette sneaking him alcohol, and his grandparents pretending not to notice. Caleb cracks the cap off of both his and Harrison’s using the hem of his shirt before sitting down again. Harrison mouths a thank you before relaxing into his seat again, taking a swig.

The rest of dinner is relatively peaceful. Andy and Frankie part ways not long later, saying they're exhausted and have an early flight tomorrow up to Vermont. Eleanor and Danny insist on playing a board game, which becomes an all-out Monopoly brawl. Dad doesn't take part in any of it, simply sitting back and glaring at anyone who dares to smile on a moment he despised so much. Though, no one paid him any attention. Even Harrison was loving it all. Caleb was unaware of just how competitive his partner gets during board games. It was rather endearing, seeing him get excited over every piece that falls on his property, and how he slumps when he, too, has to pay inevitably. Him and Eleanor are apparently one hell of a duo and team up on the rest of the table. It comes down to a final battle between the two, where Harrison eventually caves and gives Eleanor the property she wants, and thus, letting Eleanor win the game.

Caleb and Harrison help clean up from dinner and dessert while his siblings and parents scurry away from the responsibility. Caleb was happy to take up washing the dishes, Harrison clearing the table and helping Caleb's grandparents put away the board games. Harrison comes from the dining room with the last glasses, setting them down next to the sink.

"Thank you," Caleb shot him a small smile, rinsing out the glass and washing it before setting it on the drying rack. Harrison leans against the counter next to him, watching curiously, avoiding being alone with the rest of Caleb's family. "Tired?" Harrison nods. "We can go to bed."

"If you're not tired-"

"I'm always tired," Caleb chuckles, eyeing the suds left on his hands.

"Don't you dare-- Caleb!" Harrison groans and laughs as Caleb smears bubbles on Harrison's face. "You are so- you're an idiot."

"Says the one with bubbles on his face," Caleb shrugs, laughing as Harrison pulls Caleb closer, trying to wipe the bubbles off onto Caleb again. "Stop you- oh my God you are so annoying. Harry!"

They giggle together, Caleb's hoodie with a patch of soap on it, and Harrison's arms around Caleb's waist. Caleb rests a hand on his back, holding him close. No one is looking. Harrison notices that, too; they're alone. He presses up on his toes, leaving a brief kiss to his mouth. Caleb smiles, leaning back against the counter. Harrison rests his head against Caleb's shoulder, close to his heart, Caleb kissing the

top of his head. Outside, the sound of frogs and crickets singing by the lake echo through the screened windows.

“Thank you for coming down,” Caleb murmurs into his hair. Harrison nods, nestling against his shoulder, squeezing his waist.

“Thank you for letting me,” Harrison whispers back. “We’re doing it.”

“We are,” Caleb cracks a small grin to himself. “We just gonna do this whole…. Back and forth thing?”

“Until we settle in one place,” Harrison confirms. Caleb can’t help but smile at that idea. “One step at a time. We’ll get there eventually.”

Caleb won’t complain. He can live with traveling excessively. He can live with a couple years of long flights, wandering castle halls anxiously, unsure of what he can or can’t touch, and waiting for Harrison to fly into Georgia. He likes the idea of a trial-- figuring out where they like better, what they like most.

Sometimes, when Harrison thinks about their relationship, it’s hard to imagine that it’s only been four months. Almost five. It’s hard to accept that his entire life hasn’t been so happy, and yet, so terrifying. Harrison has never had a relationship that lasted. Never had a relationship at all. Sure, there were attractive people in University, and there were a plethora of times he’s kissed someone, but never before has he been loved like this. Never before has he been loved like this. Never before has he felt so inclined to be with someone for the rest of his life.

“You need to shower,” Caleb whispers into his hair. Harrison snickers. “Upstairs. Door to the left of our room. That's our bathroom. You can steal my stuff if you didn’t bring your own.”

“You’re such a charmer,” Harrison rolls his eyes, pulling away and patting his chest. “You going to bed soon?”

“Just need to make sure my grandparents don’t need any more help first,” Caleb reassures, standing upright. “Go.”

Harrison goes up the stairs, and Caleb joins the room with his grandparents.

“He’s getting tired, so we’re turning in,” Caleb admits quietly, leaning against the back of Grandma’s chair. “Do you need anything before I go up?”

“No, thank you, honey,” Grandma reaches up and pats his face. “Maybe shave. You’re gettin’ scruffy.”

“Gram-”

“You asked if I needed anything ,” she shrugs, smiling. “Night, hon. Get some sleep.”

“Night.”

Caleb caught his father’s eye as he went. He quickly looks away and goes up the stairs, avoiding him as best as possible. Dad isn’t subtle in following him, the stairs creaking when he follows. Caleb works on properly organizing some of his and Harrison’s stuff so it wasn’t too cluttered.

“So, what's your plan?” Dad asks. Caleb shrugs, cleaning up any laundry he had yet to put away. “Don’t know or won’t tell me?”

“Why should I tell you?” Caleb asks in response, not making eye contact. “All you’ll do is find a way to get in the way, or stop me. I’ve learned my lesson: don’t include you or Mom in stuff, because you’ll be too controlling.”

“We’re trying to care and-”

“Last I heard, you wanted nothing to do with me until I ‘ *repented and apologized for my mistakes’* . Take my lack of apology as an adieu,” Caleb shot back. “I have a plan. A pretty freaking solid one, too. And I’m perfectly happy in it without you. In fact, the couple of weeks I was away from you have been the best weeks of my life. So, please…” Caleb gestures to the door to his room. “I’m fine. I don’t need you.”

“You’re my son.”

“You need to decide when I’m your son and when I’m a criminal stranger you have no attachment to,” Caleb says simply. “I won’t claim you. You don’t claim me. We can just go in opposite directions.” Dad is quiet. “I know you’re just looking for an endorsement for the election next year. I’m not giving you one. After everything? I’d do just about anything to see you lose the White House.”

“Are you truly happy in breaking your parents' hearts?”

“Knowing fully well I have the support of everyone else? Absolutely,” Caleb said simply. “I’m going to ask you to leave now.” Dad grits his

teeth. He opens his mouth to argue, but nothing comes out. Finally, he parts ways, and exits.

Another couple minutes later, Harrison comes back, hair damp and looking comfortable in his sleeping clothes. Harrison closes the door gently behind him, kneeling on the edge of the bed and crawling toward Caleb. He captured a sweet kiss, Caleb pulling on Harrison's hips to drag him closer. Harrison smiles, wrapping himself around his partner, kissing him deeper, slower, but just as desperate for his touch.

"I heard his voice. You okay?" Harrison murmurs against the corner of Caleb's mouth, thumb swiping along Caleb's jaw. Caleb nods. "You sure?" Caleb pulls back, ever so slightly, smiling at the sight of Harrison's face so smooth, so gentle. No creases, no frown lines. Truly just… him. "Like what you see?"

"Cocky bastard," Caleb rolls his eyes, arms slung around Harrison's waist and pulling him in, flush against himself. Chest to chest, legs tangled, Harrison's face buried in Caleb's neck (and leaving kisses and nipping at his collarbone while he's at it). "Wanna see the lake tomorrow?" Harrison nods, sliding a hand under Caleb's shirt, fingers brushing along his ribs. "And we can sit in my favorite spot tomorrow night, when the skies are clear, and you can see all the stars…" Harrison smiles, kissing his throat. "And on Tuesday, we'll go to Atlanta with Eleanor, and we'll pop down to Ma's before getting Kate. Disney a couple days after that? Maybe we'll fly, save my car the miles."

"Sounds fun," Harrison agrees softly. "And we'll leave before the fireworks?"

"Ellie will want to see them," Caleb whispers back. "I'll tough it out for the girls." Harrison looks between his eyes, frowning. "I'll tell you about it one day."

"Okay," Harrison nods, smiling sadly. "I'll wait."

He can learn patience. He will do just about everything to keep what they have.

That night, it doesn't take much for either of them to sleep. Harrison was exhausted from a couple of weeks in his own personal emotional hell, and Caleb was exhausted from sleepless nights without Harrison. It's not the massive king sized bed they were used to, or the brightly lit hotel rooms. It felt close to home. Harrison, squeezed in with Caleb,

buried as deep as he can get, and falling asleep in an instant.

The following few days are just domestic bliss. It's dragging Harrison into the salt water lake, promising him that, no, there aren't any gators in the water. It's splashing him until he starts fighting back, and water gun fights with Caleb's siblings. Whining that the water was too cold, only for Caleb to grab him by the waist and haul him in anyways. It's laying on the dock under a hot sun, Harrison whispering that it's never this warm in England, even in the summers.

It's laying in a hammock that was recently replaced, the old one too frayed. The two, snuggled into the netting with a blanket pulled around them, staring up at a sky full of stars, talking about the future with such certainty. Caleb has never been more sure of anything than he was in this moment. They talk about the transition of power, when Harrison finally has to take charge, whether that be in the next year, or in another ten. They talk about traveling-- when they will go where. Harrison will be in Georgia for January, but back in Europe for February. Caleb will be there for the weekend of Valentine's Day, and then back in England again for a couple weeks in March. Harrison will come over for April. They will just keep cycling. They will set up an office space for Harrison in America, and keep some of their stuff in both homes. They'll figure it all out.

On Tuesday, the drive to Atlanta is perfect. It's a beautifully sunny morning, and not too much traffic. It's almost a five hour drive, and they were scheduled to meet at Ma's for 11, so they left pretty early. Eleanor slept in the back seat, and Harrison and Caleb sat quietly, basking in the peaceful music and a less than scenic drive. Harrison can't stop looking at Caleb as he drives. He looks so… normal. So calm.

In Atlanta, Eleanor wakes up just in time for them to pull into the parking lot of Ma's, a cute little diner that transcends space, time, and life. There is never going to be another place like Ma's.

"Why is it called Ma's?" Harrison whispers to Caleb as they stroll the parking lot, Eleanor running ahead, eager to see some of her favorite people again.

"Her name is Mary Ann. She signs her name as M-A," Caleb shrugs. "And she's very motherly. She's just… Ma."

"And she owns it?"

"It's generational," Caleb nods. "Ma's grandma opened it. It's hers

now. She didn't have kids, but Finch is her godson, so he'll inherit it, and then his kids will inherit it, and the cycle will continue. Kinda like a certain monarchy…"

"Oh, shut up," Harrison rolls his eyes, following Caleb in.

"There he is!" Mary Ann says with a squealed cheer, already hugging Eleanor tight around the shoulders. It's quiet in the diner-- the brunch rush hasn't started yet. "Oh, baby, get your ass over here. I missed you."

"Hi, Ma," Caleb says with a sad smile, leaning down to hug her back. The woman must be in her late sixties, early seventies. She is wrinkled, with smile lines, and has some of the brightest eyes Harrison has ever seen. Much like Caleb's grandma, her hair is long-- all the way down her back, and she laughs like any teenager. "Holding up alright?"

"Oh, I'm trying," she hums back, rubbing his back. "Had to get a total knee replacement a couple months back. But I'm still standing."

"Of course you are," Caleb chuckles. "It takes a lot more than that to take you down."

"Damn right," she pats his face, pulling away. She looks to Harrison next. "Hi, honey. You must be the boy I've been hearin' about on the news." Harrison blinks a couple times. It's been a while since someone greeted him so casually, without any attempt at courtesies. *The boy* she says, as if he wasn't royalty.

He kind of loved it.

"Ma, Harrison. Harrison, Mary Ann," Caleb introduces with a small smile. Mary Ann pats Harrison's arm happily.

"Please, go take your booth. Most of 'em are already here. Just waiting on you."

"As always!" One of the guys calls out from the table. Caleb shakes his head with a smile, leading Harrison over to the biggest booth in the diner, already filled with people. "Nice of you to finally show up, shit head."

"Nice of you to finally invite me, dick," Caleb shot back at Finch, nudging him. Finch stands to give him one of those bro hugs that Caleb hates so much, but takes only from them. "Almost forgot how to

get here."

"Is that why you're late?" Zoey teases from her spot across the table. Caleb flips her off, sliding in and pulling Harrison with him. Eleanor was happily wedged between Claire and Zoey already.

"I just drove from the fuckin' panhandle with these two. Cut me some slack," Caleb shot back. "Crew, this is Harrison. Harrison- this is… too many people for me to list off, so try to keep up."

"Hi," Harrison waves shyly. His confidence that he puts up around Caleb's family diminishes. He's around peers. People his age. People he doesn't know, but Caleb wants to impress.

"We're all here then," Malcolm smirks, looking around the table. "Been a minute."

" *Not all* " Caleb can't help but think. He notices the empty chair that used to get pulled up to the head of the table for Annika. She won't be attending. He can't help but feel like he was at fault for her absence.

"Been three and a half years," Claire states, smirking at him. "Who wants to sum up the past couple years for the group?"

"I'll do it!" Leander sits up quickly.

"Oh God-" Caleb groans sitting back in his chair.

"So, in the past three years," Leander introduces. "Also, hi, I'm Leander. Call me Lee. Or Leander. Or Laundry, if you're Eleanor."

"Once. I said it *once* ," Eleanor fought.

"In the past three years," he begins again, taking a dramatic breath. "Zoey has dated just about every man between the ages of eighteen and twenty five in Central Georgia. Malcolm and Claire have gotten engaged despite literally only dating for a year and a half. I have had two breakdowns that resulted in me bleaching my hair platinum blond then shaving my head when I didn't like it. Zach has also slept with the majority of Central Georgia, and even proposed once to a girl he didn't know the middle name of. Eleanor is literally twelve, also known as the worst age; no one is cool at 12 years old. Caleb is apparently gay and screwing the Prince of England, future King of England, and his Dad somehow got shittier than when we last saw him, and this is the first time most of us are speaking to him since a one-sided fight three years ago--" Caleb flushes pink, planting his head

in his hands. “Finch hasn’t screwed anyone, poor bastard, but has thought about asking out the cute waitress who will be bringing our drinks in a couple minutes, and Annika is a homophobic asshole who is no longer welcome in Ma’s Diner, per Ma herself. Is that it?”

“Sounds pretty complete,” Malcolm confirms. “Any other roasts?”

“Sounds about right,” Zoey claps her hands together.

“I got drinks,” a waitress greets, right on time, wielding two trays full of mugs and glasses. Finch immediately stands to help her dish them out.

“Harrison, I didn’t know what you’d like, so we ordered you a black coffee,” Finch says.

“Perfect,” Harrison smiles. “Thank you.”

The conversation keeps flowing as they go. Lots of questions directed at Caleb and Harrison, trying to catch up for missed years. An excessive amount of apologies for misplaced anger. There’s so much laughter, and noise, and so many smiles, it almost feels like being a kid again.

Ma stops by to hang out for a while. She leans against the booth behind Caleb, and she takes part in some conversation. Caleb hadn’t noticed how much he missed her voice, her aggressive love for this group of kids, now young adults. The way she swore like a sailor, and yet, threatened to smack them in the mouth with one of her wooden spoons if they did it, too. She starts to appeal to Harrison, getting plenty of giggles out of him.

They eat a lot, and have multiple rounds of tea or coffee. Zoey emphasizes a rather mortifying memory of Caleb refusing to kiss her if she had coffee in the morning, even if it has been over twelve hours since she drank it. Harrison finds it hilarious, and knows he will hold it over Caleb’s head later.

Close to noon, Harrison gets the *landing soon* text from Kate.

“Time to go?” Caleb assumes when he shows the text. Harrison nods. “Alright. Sorry guys. Kate’s about to touch down. We’ll be in Atlanta for a while, so maybe we’ll do this again?”

“Tuesday mornings, you know the drill,” Malcolm agrees. “Be here. Or else we talk shit.”

“Oh no, people who already talked shit will continue to talk shit,” Caleb shot back. “El. C’mon.”

“I’m coming , you impatient idiot,” Eleanor sighs, climbing over people and bouncing toward them.

They part ways with a promise to return next week. Harrison nudges Caleb when they get into the car, cracking a teasing smile.

“Was it the coffee that you didn’t like kissing?” Harrison teases. Caleb rolls his eyes, leaning over the center console and pecking his lips. Harrison laughs lightly. “Gotcha.”

“Ew. Keep that to yourself,” Ellie scoffs, clambering into the backseat.

“Ellie is going through her homophobic phase,” Caleb teases. Eleanor scrambles for a defense but ends up just groaning and slapping his arm.

Driving through Atlanta with Harrison, Kate, and Eleanor felt like a dream he never before fathomed. Kate and Eleanor pick the music, and they drive with the windows down through the city. It almost felt normal. They almost felt like regular people.

Disney was no different. Wasting their air miles, they flew down without much time to spare. Harrison waved around his Royal Credit Card without care, so long as it meant making the rest of them happy. Caleb didn’t realize it was possible for someone to spoil him any more than he already was. He wasn’t complaining, though.

Caleb knows there will be a million photos all over every news site globally from their afternoon, but he didn’t care. He couldn’t care about any of it. He was having fun eating soft pretzels shaped like Mickey, and buying Eleanor and Kate matching ears, and stumbling over one another as they strolled through Disney Springs.

Caleb liked being in Disney, listening to the music and dancing with them. Eleanor was skipping and dancing and singing. Harrison was holding his hand and happily let Caleb sway with him when they were standing still, waiting in line for another pretzel. Caleb tucked his chin onto Harrison’s shoulder, arms around his waist, Harrison’s back to Caleb’s chest, and they sway side to side, happy as can be. Caleb hums along with the music, turning his face into Harrison’s neck, earning soft laughter.

“Happy?” Harrison asked in a whisper. Caleb nods.

“Happiest I’ve ever been.”

It’s New Years Eve, and when the sun sets, and they are encased in night, Caleb can’t help but be nervous for midnight. He can’t help but fear the fireworks show, the building anxiety around loud bangs and flashes that remind him of times far more sour than this one. They sit in the Disney Springs parking lot to avoid the crowds that were too tight to walk through. They sat on the top floor of the lot on a blanket that Caleb kept in his car, just for moments like this. Caleb rested his head in Harrison’s lap, body tucked between his legs. He trains his attention on Harrison’s fingers in his hair, and the sound of each breath. Eleanor and Kate are still dancing, still laughing, counting every minute as they get closer to midnight.

When they get to 11:59, the girls count down from sixty, smiling ear to ear. Caleb looks up at Harrison through his eyelashes, smiling at the feather light touches, his eyes shining and bright, his smile so authentic.

Thirty. Twenty nine. Twenty eight.

His heart is racing. He wonders what the next year will bring. He hopes it’s all good, and no more drama. He wants a year of kissing his boyfriend, of smiling, of not hiding from his family. He wants a year of good memories. He wants a year of this-- the four of them. Or even just the two of them. Anything is better than being singular.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

He knows the explosions are coming. For a split second, if even, his mind is on the Atlanta alleyways, waiting for the gun to fire at his chest, thinking he is going to die. For a split second, he’s thinking about the very first time he hated his father’s politics, because *fuck you, these gun laws are nonexistent. They’re killing us.* He’s still just an Atlanta kid.

Three. Two.

This is a new memory, overwriting the old. There’s plenty of space for something new.

One.

The girls shriek out a *Happy New Year!* The world does too. Everywhere, people are screaming, cheering, celebrating. The fireworks are sounding. Harrison’s face is lit up with red, white, blue,

gold, every color under the sun. Harrison has never looked so heavenly.

Harrison leans down, leaving a soft kiss to Caleb's mouth, upside down and smiley. The explosions don't sound so loud anymore. The rattling in his chest, the stirring in his gut, the tremble to his hands, it's all nothing. Everything is nothing.

Harrison is all there is, and more. He is the stars in the sky on a perfectly clear night. He's the clouds swimming below him during a midday flight. He's the taste of cold rain, and the thrill of lightning strikes. He's the moon, pulling the tides, and the sun, warming the sky.

Harrison's father once said he would make for a great king. His father never mentioned what he would be as a person, never made any predictions of what would come from his soul and the brevity of his life. As he kissed his partner, as he listened to loud pops and squeals of fireworks, and their sisters danced and screamed and smiled, he came to the conclusion that, perhaps, his title and his life doesn't have to be separate.

Their lives are made of nothing short of possibility. So, when tomorrow comes, and the world rears its ugly head once more, hand in hand, they will find a way to fight right back. They've done it before. They'll do it all again, over and over, for the rest of eternity, if it means more New Years kisses, more Disney trips, more dancing in empty parking lots, and awkward dinners with each other's families. Every hardship is worth the bliss that follows.

Tomorrow isn't promised, but it's possible. That's all they need.

Chapter End Notes

> And that, my friends, is all for Stars, Stripes, and Aristocratic Snobs.
>
> Thank you for all your patience in this final chapter. I had a really hard time staying motivated to complete this last chapter. I just hate goodbyes, I guess :')
>
> The final stats: 563 pages. 121907 words. 12000 words in this chapter alone. 680,071 characters. All written in about a month and a half. This fanfic is a s long as both of my actually published novels COMBINED

With that, I guess... I bid you all adieu. It's been fun, friends. If you wanna keep up with my endeavors and what I might post in the future here on ao3, my twitter is @ mellohayl. I hope to see some of you there. otherwise, farewell. thanks for hangin' out :')

o7

-hayl

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!